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**The significance of the Mers-el-Kébir incident
among factors determining support for Gaullism
in Unoccupied France**



Written by Graeme Huggan

M.A. by Research in History

Department of History

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April 2001

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19 APR 2002

Graeme Huggan

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The object of this thesis is to ascertain what was the most significant factor in determining support for Gaullism in unoccupied France. The first aim of this dissertation is to study the ways in which the Mers-el-Kébir incident affected de Gaulle's movement. The second aim is to examine the influence of other aspects on Gaullism, such as the origins and organisation of the Free French movement, the propaganda and policies of the Vichy régime, the opinions of the French Résistance, and other external influences such as American, British and Russian foreign policy.

This thesis will try to offer some conclusions as to if, why and when de Gaulle and the Free French movement became popular in France. It will also compare the reasons for his popularity and unpopularity and rate them against the effect of the Mers-el-Kébir incident as well as determining whether the extent of his support was beyond his control or was due to his own actions.

*For my parents Robert and Dianne and my grandparents
Alec, Robert and Florence*

*This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother,
May Collison (1924 - 2000)*

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Cover photograph 'General de Gaulle in London in 1940' by Cecil Beaton taken from A. Crawley, De Gaulle: A Biography (London, 1969), p.129.

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Introduction

One of the most controversial aspects of the Second World War, the occupation of France and French public opinion during that time, has been shrouded in rumours and mystery. For thirty years, myths have been created to bolster the renewed support of 'Pétainisme' and to justify the 'greatness' that is Gaullism. Each myth has succeeded in further obscuring fact from fiction. Each myth has supported a political grouping intent on obtaining political power and influence in post-war France. For fifty years, rumours have abounded over whether Marshal Philippe Pétain or General Charles de Gaulle was the true French resister and whether de Gaulle's hatred for the Vichy government was insincere¹. By disentangling post-war opinions of authors, historians and politicians, we may find out what really happened and what was really going through the minds of French people at that time.

In 1940, the whole world was in turmoil during which France was occupied and suffered a very unnatural existence. The speed and completeness of their defeat and the manner in which they were governed and occupied had never been experienced by the French nation before. Nor had Europe experienced a war like it. 'In the streets of Paris and the other cities and towns of France there was no shouting when war came'². The people of France did not understand why they were going to war. Another blood bath like the Great War haunted people's minds. Furthermore, would they not 'lose' the peace again like in 1919? Public opinion was neither determined nor indifferent, neither pacifist nor patriotic. To sum it up, André Beaufre said, 'the nation went to war looking over its shoulder, its eyes seeking for peace'³. James McMillan believed their inactivity came from a false sense of security, such as the Maginot Line, rather than from fear or defeatism⁴. Complacency and lassitude became endemic. Pétain, 'in his great age, epitomised the paralysis of the French people'⁵. The grave demographic situation gave the French people a strong desire to save French lives whenever possible.

After the defeat in June 1940, France seemed to take a backseat in the proceedings. On 3 July 1940, the British attack on the French Fleet at Mers-el-Kébir took place. It was seen as a necessity by the British

¹ Pro-Pétain feeling in René Benjamin, *Le Maréchal du Peuple* (Paris, 1944) and pro-de Gaulle feeling in Colonel Passy, *Souvenirs Tome I et Tome II* (Monte Carlo, 1947).

² William L. Shirer, *The Collapse of the Third Republic* (London, 1970), p.490.

³ André Beaufre, *1940: The Fall of France* (London, 1967), p.39.

⁴ James F. McMillan, *Twentieth-Century France* (New York, 1997), p.124.

⁵ Major-General Spears quoted in Colin Dyer, *Population and Society in Twentieth-Century France* (Suffolk, 1978), p.103.



Government and was therefore carried out without much protest. It sent shockwaves around the globe, not least to France where Anglophobic sentiment struck home. The Pétain Government propaganda machine wasted no time in filling newspapers and posters with anti-British and anti-de Gaulle slogans. On 7 July 1940, in 'Journal des Débats', one article stated, 'C'est plus qu'un crime,...c'est une extraordinaire faute dont les conséquences sont incalculables'⁶. However, what seemed ominous to the French was that the British would be defeated soon and that their only hope lay in the Victor of Verdun, Marshal Pétain.

The Mers-el-Kébir incident or 'tragédie' as it was and is known in France posed an early threat to the existence of the newly-founded Free French organisation. The first aim of this dissertation is to study the ways in which the Mers-el-Kébir incident threatened de Gaulle's movement. It is necessary to analyse its effect on recruitment to de Gaulle's movement, how it affected French public opinion, how the Vichy government was affected by it and what action they took against the aggression, and what the home resistance movements' views were on it. It will also be important to look at the anti-British and anti-de Gaulle propaganda which sprung up soon after the incident occurred. Other aspects of this incident in relation to the support for Gaullism include how the significance of a vehement anti-British policy affected the de Gaulle movement, how people responded to de Gaulle's speech on the eighth of July, and also how people evaluated the way in which de Gaulle dealt with the British after the Mers-el-Kébir incident.

We need to consider the following question: - Who did the French blame for the Mers-el-Kébir incident? We must contemplate whether the incident was looked upon as solely the fault of the British, or the fault of both the British and the Gaullists, or otherwise. The answer depends on how the French perceived de Gaulle at that time. The effects of the Mers-el-Kébir incident will form the first chapter.

The second aim of this dissertation is to compare the influence of the Mers-el-Kébir incident with other aspects that contributed to or reduced the support for Gaullism in Unoccupied France in order to understand how influential the British attack was in the overall scope of things. The focus in the second chapter will be on the personality of de Gaulle, his Free French movement, how de Gaulle's own personality and political views may have been a factor, and how some rumours and theories may have misconstrued fact from fiction and therefore coloured people's opinions of de Gaulle and his movement. Also, an examination of the Free French movement itself will be very helpful as will de Gaulle's relations with his allies. An

⁶ Journal des Débats (Clermont-Ferrand, 7 July 1940), p.1.

analysis will follow how the Vichy régime and especially Pétain may have affected the influence and support of Gaullism in Unoccupied France. To search for a consensus will not be an easy undertaking. All of these influential aspects must be compared with the importance of Mers-el-Kébir and evaluated in terms of how significant each aspect was to the support of de Gaulle in France.

There are many subsidiary factors that need to be reviewed in this dissertation. One of these factors is the British and their effect on de Gaulle's popularity in France. The British undertook actions that were very unpopular but deemed necessary by Winston Churchill and his government. They also supported de Gaulle and his movement in monetary and moral terms. An evaluation must be made about whether the British did affect Gaullist support in France and if so, in what way did they influence French public opinion? We must also examine the role of the British intelligence network and to look at relations between the United States and Russian governments and the Free French. This will form a chapter on external influences affecting support for Gaullism.

Another subsidiary factor is the French Home Resistance. There were various groups and movements, all of which possessed different aims and political views. In order to understand if and how the Resistance movements accepted the authority and leadership of de Gaulle and the Free French movement, and whether this influenced the nation's beliefs, it is necessary to compare their aims and objectives, to discover how fast news travelled of de Gaulle's exile in London, and to summarise how Communist strength from 1941 affected de Gaulle's support in France. The circumstances of the French Communist Party illustrate to us the different political groupings and how they transpired into resistance movements. They also show us that there was another strong contender for head of the French Resistance: - the Communists even thought of themselves as the sole resisters of France. We have not yet touched the surface of how different the many resistance organisations were. However, due to the reluctance of many former resisters to tell their story, it would seem that time is not on the historians' side. The resistance organisations are important to this investigation because they do mirror public opinion somewhat or at least provide a growing trend of public opinion in France. Their influence will form the basis of a later chapter.

A further subsidiary factor is the mentality of people living in the Unoccupied zone from 1940 to 1942. The conditions that people lived in, the extent of feeling occupied and the support for the Vichy Government were very different between the Occupied zone and the Unoccupied zone. These differences

led to a divergence of opinion between the zones. The people in the unoccupied zone had less to complain about and could do more as they pleased. The southern resistance organisations reflect this. To determine how popular de Gaulle was in the Unoccupied zone, the final chapter will analyse French opinion in that zone with regard to de Gaulle, the other resistance movements, and of course the Vichy Government. To understand the extent of support for de Gaulle, one must understand the moral and mental attitudes of French people at that time.

All myths have a certain perception of what the words 'resistance' and 'collaboration' mean. If 'armchair resisters' are part of the Resistance, then the membership is more substantial. If collaboration only means dealing directly with Germans, then this group is very small. There are quite a few questions one must answer before looking into the extent of Gaullist support in France. The ideas that myths create will become an integral part of this analysis. Once one has defined what these words mean, one can understand how much support de Gaulle actually attained in Unoccupied France and also how popular the Vichy Government were during their early period in office.

When de Gaulle wrote his three-volume 'Mémoires de Guerre' in the 1950's, few opposed what he had written perhaps, through guilt or through inactivity. Not enough clear evidence was available to discount some of the things that de Gaulle claimed. Even now, sixty years after the fall of France, we are no closer to knowing the truth about certain aspects of Vichy France. Most of the Vichy government's records are still unavailable and many important documents either did not exist in the first place or have been lost forever. French resisters and collaborators have been very reluctant to come forward to tell their story owing usually to the political situation in France at the time. Their secrecy, a survival technique during the war, has remained with them. Unfortunately, there is not a sufficiently large sample of witnesses to provide us with a fair view of what happened and what people felt during the occupation, especially for the period up until late 1942 when France was totally occupied. Furthermore, when these people are interviewed, they are asked more questions about Pétain and the Vichy Government and less about what they thought of the Free French movement.

Most post-war historians have concentrated less on de Gaulle and the Free French movement and written more on the controversies of Vichy collaboration and anti-Semitic policies. Historians such as Robert

Paxton, Henri Rousso, Jean-Pierre Azéma and Philippe Burrin have contributed to the revisionism of Vichy French history. They have uncovered evidence which had previously been concealed or forgotten about⁷.

Owing to a variety of myths and post-Resistance analyses, there has been a great deal of misleading information over the last fifty years. Due to the 'Gaullist resistancialist myth'⁸, the issue of support for Gaullism in Unoccupied France has not been effectively researched. Many have presented critiques of de Gaulle such as Admiral Muselier who wrote how de Gaulle used people and as a consequence did irreparable damage to the Free French Movement⁹. Others have written books to further their own career such as Georges Bidault who later wrote acidly about de Gaulle, 'When a man is in exile like de Gaulle, even when he is not an outlaw in his own country, he sees men and events only from a distance, so that he makes errors of judgement'¹⁰. Many have written hagiographic 'de Gaulliana' such as Aidan Crawley who seems to be in awe of de Gaulle and his past triumphs¹¹. In the past, some French people believed that they lived in a nation of resisters and that de Gaulle had always been popular as 'Lorraine', the organ of Fighting France, would have us believe in October 1942: - 'Son chef, le général de Gaulle, est acclamé par tous les Français'¹². Only recently, with de Gaulle's demise and recent biographies, has the record been set straight. Historians such as Andrew Shennan and Jean Lacouture have re-examined the career of de Gaulle and provided a revisionist approach to the 'Gaullist resistancialist myth'. They have tried to find a balanced medium between Gaullist and Vichy propaganda¹³. This is the approach that will be followed in this thesis.

Material on public opinion in France and especially on people's feelings for de Gaulle and the Free French is not too easy to discover. One of the better and later accounts of public opinion in France is Pierre Laborie's 'L'Opinion Française sous Vichy' (1990) which is very extensive in its research, but relies rather too heavily on providing evidence from only two regions in France. Other recent and important works of synthesis include John F. Sweets 'Choices in Vichy France' (1986) and Jean-Pierre Azema's 'From

⁷ Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (London and New York, 1975), Henri Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (London and Massachusetts, 1996; trans. Arthur Goldhammer), Jean-Pierre Azéma, *From Munich to the Liberation, 1938-1944* (Cambridge, 1984), and Philippe Burrin, *Living with Defeat: France under the German Occupation 1940-1944* (London, 1996).

⁸ Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, p.18.

⁹ Vice-Admiral Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme* (Paris, 1946). A contemporary example is Stephane Zagdanski, *Poor de Gaulle* (2000).

¹⁰ Georges Bidault, *Resistance: A Political Autobiography* (London, 1967; trans. Marianne Sinclair), p.5.

¹¹ Aidan Crawley, *De Gaulle: A Biography* (London, 1969), pp. 136, 186, 203 and 472.

¹² *Lorraine* (Lorraine, October 1942), p.1.

¹³ Refer to Jean Lacouture, *De Gaulle: The Rebel 1890-1944* (New York and London, 1984; trans. Patrick O'Brian, 1990) and Andrew Shennan, *De Gaulle* (London and New York, 1993).

Munich to the Liberation, 1938-1944' (1984). Furthermore, H.R. Kedward has recently reassessed the French *résistance* and shed new light on their feelings and opinions owing to his innumerable interviews with ex-resisters¹⁴. Apart from the lack of information on public opinion in France, there is also a distinct lack of secondary sources on the differences between people's views in the occupied zone and their views in the unoccupied zone.

Primary and secondary sources are growing considerably in number and are providing us with a wealth of information about the period in question, but owing to the considerable differences between French people who share the same general political views, it is very difficult to gauge how anti-de Gaulle or pro-Pétain a movement was by reading one of its member's memoirs. What we must understand is that every piece of academic work about people's opinions and feelings has to be generalised in order for it to be written. Furthermore, the people who expressed their views after the war are probably the people who tried to influence others during the war. Therefore, where there is one view, there are most probably a group of supporters who expressed that view as their own. We must come to terms with political climates to understand why someone may have become increasingly pro-Pétain, and we must balance out the exaggerated myths of de Gaulle and the propaganda for the Vichy régime and German occupiers to determine the truth.

After deciphering fact from fiction within selected primary and secondary sources and examining all the influential factors, an evaluation will be made about the extent of Gaullist support in Unoccupied France and the effect of the Mers-el-Kébir incident on de Gaulle's popularity in Unoccupied France. Furthermore, Mers-el-Kébir will be set in context with all of the other factors affecting de Gaulle's support in France and a comparison will be made. By studying all of the hindrances and benefits to Gaullism in the Unoccupied zone, we will better understand the effect the early incident of Mers-el-Kébir had on the Gaullist movement and its support base in Vichy France. It is not impossible that the incident of July 1940 was of some benefit to de Gaulle. Answers may be gleaned from people's thoughts at the time as well as the effect that negative propaganda had on people in the Unoccupied zone.

The main aims of this dissertation are to better understand the relationship between the Mers-el-Kébir incident and the support for Gaullism in Vichy France and to consider how much support de Gaulle had

¹⁴ H.R. Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France: A Study of Ideas and Motivation in the Southern Zone, 1940-42* (Oxford, 1978).

attained in southern France by November 1942 when the Germans occupied the whole country; and the part the Mers-el-Kébir incident and other factors played in this. Another objective is to determine whether the extent of Gaullist support was due to de Gaulle's own actions or due to external events beyond his control. The final objective is to determine what was the most significant influence on support for Gaullism. This dissertation is not an attempt to lay all the blame for de Gaulle's misfortunes or otherwise on Mers-el-Kébir, nor is it an attempt to crucify the myth of de Gaulle. That critique has been written too many times before. It is simply an exercise in establishing fact over fiction and hopefully bringing new evidence to light.

At present, there seems to be no definitive work based purely on the support for de Gaulle in Unoccupied France. In this sense, this dissertation aspires to be part of a hypothesised 'definitive work'.

Mers-el-Kébir as a factor in the popularity of the Gaullists in Unoccupied France.

The French Atlantic Squadron, 'Raid Force', comprised about twenty per cent of the total French Fleet including the 'Dunkerque', 'Strasbourg', 'Provence' and 'Bretagne'. Most were anchored too close together by the harbour at Mer-el-Kébir, near Oran on the north coast of Algeria, to put up any kind of effective defence. During the night of 2-3 July 1940, the infinitely superior 'Force H' of the Royal Navy began laying magnetic mines to trap the French ships in port. The following morning at 7.05am the British Captain Holland handed an ultimatum to Vice-Admiral Marcel Gensoul, Commander-in-Chief of the 'Force du Raid'. There were four options given to the French:- (a) Sail with the British and continue to fight against the Axis Powers, (b) Sail with reduced crews to a British port and the reduced crews would be repatriated, (c) Sail with reduced crews to the neutrality of the West Indies (e.g. Martinique), or (d) the British would demand that the French sink their own ships. If the French failed to agree to any of these options, then the British would use force against the French Fleet. Gensoul informed the French Admiralty about most of the ultimatum but did not mention the Martinique alternative and implied that the British had said, "Sink your ships or we'll use force!"¹⁵ The Admiralty, of course, told him to resist.

The first salvo hit the French ships at 4.57pm. The fleet was caught in a trap, it was shelled at point blank range by the British and could not manoeuvre effectively. Without being able to reply, the French Fleet was destroyed in thirteen minutes. Only the 'Strasbourg', 'Volga', 'Terrible' and 'Tigre' somehow escaped to reach the French port of Toulon the following day. The 'Provence' and 'Dunkerque' ran aground and the 'Bretagne' was blown up and capsized. Only the aircraft carrier 'Commandant-Teste' remained unscathed. The dead were buried on the 5 July. After Admiral Esteva's message on the 6th that the 'Dunkerque' was only slightly damaged, the British bombers returned to finish her off. They sank a tug and trawler, the 'Esterel' and 'Terre-Neuve' respectively, and left a hole in the side of the 'Dunkerque' the blast from which had killed one hundred and fifty-four men. The total French casualties were one thousand, two hundred and ninety-seven; three hundred and fifty-one were wounded.

¹⁵ The Times, 'The French Nation Deceived' (London, 9 July 1940), p.4.

Mers-el-Kébir was part of 'Operation Catapult' organised by the British as a matter of self-preservation. On the 3 July, the British seized French warships and merchant ships without warning in the ports of Plymouth, Portsmouth and Southampton. The French Fleet in Alexandria agreed to disarm and were blocked in that port. Finally, the battle-cruiser 'Richelieu' was bombarded at Dakar on 8 July. These acts gave rise to serious consequences for de Gaulle and the British, but by far the most traumatic and shocking incident took place at Mers-el-Kébir. It was Mers-el-Kébir that immediately influenced opinion in the French free zone. It was the loss of so many French lives in such a short time that so greatly affected the French people.

When de Gaulle left France for London in June 1940, he faced a great many crises including his problems of being accepted and recognised by the British Government, the lack of response to his 'appel' of 18 June, his own misgivings about the task that he had undertaken, and his fear for the safety of his family. All of these crises paled by comparison when the Mers-el-Kébir affair threatened to destroy de Gaulle and the fledgling Free French Movement. From whence he came, de Gaulle would have to instil faith in himself and his movement in order for the population to support them at the Liberation. Further south, in the unoccupied zone, he faced a tougher challenge.

Between 1940 and 1942, the French population living in the unoccupied or 'free' zone never forgot the Mers-el-Kébir incident. They were a very harsh audience and became set in their ways only a few weeks after the Armistice. Towards 1942, the unoccupied zone became the Gaullists' target market and their popularity partly depended on how well people had taken the Mers-el-Kébir incident.

This set of circumstances would never have materialised if the Mers-el-Kébir incident had strangled the Free French movement at birth. Aidan Crawley suggests that the 'tragédie' was 'a blow...which...nearly put an end to the whole of the Free French movement'¹⁶. It was a sudden blow to their reputation in native Frenchmen's eyes. Internally, it caused a great deal of upheaval. The French Embassy became more aloof than ever towards the Gaullists, not willing to associate with a pro-British element. The work of the Free French was seriously disrupted by the incident. Admiral Muselier felt that he could not continue his plans for a Franco-British naval agreement¹⁷.

¹⁶ Crawley, *De Gaulle*, p.124.

¹⁷ Dorothy S. White, *Seeds of Discord: De Gaulle, the Free French and the Allies* (New York, 1964), p.86.

'Charles de Gaulle was hit very hard by the "terrible axe-blow" of Mers-el-Kébir'¹⁸. The loss of life greatly affected him because of the fact that it seemed like such a waste and that the French Navy had not really died in battle but had been massacred in a cowardly fashion. Furthermore, it came at a very unfortunate moment, not just for de Gaulle but also for the French people who were theoretically about to choose who would lead them during the occupation. On the 4 July, 'de Gaulle had calmed down, and had recognised that the operation, however painful, had been inevitable. But he was depressed about the longer-term effects and thought that he might give up the struggle and retire to private life in Canada. It was the first time that de Gaulle had become profoundly disheartened'. Charles Williams has stated that the positive reaction of the British people to de Gaulle and his Free French movement influenced de Gaulle's decision to stay on in London. He was the bedrock of the movement. It is difficult to imagine the Free French movement continuing without the leadership of de Gaulle¹⁹.

De Gaulle and the Free French movement suffered a severe blow to their recruitment of French soldiers and sailors. Naval recruitment had not got off to a good start anyway but soon dried up after the Mers-el-Kébir affair. Of a total of five hundred officers and eighteen thousand sailors who were stationed in England by June 1940, only fifty French naval officers and two hundred sailors chose to stay with de Gaulle²⁰, although hundreds of sailors opted for service with the British Navy. On the 30 June 1940, Vice-Admiral Muselier was given command of the Free French Navy and issued an optimistic order to rally the French sailors on 1 July. The effect of this 'ralliement' can only be a matter of conjecture now. A number of ships had recently rallied to the Gaullist cause. Now no more came. Eight months later, there were only about forty operational warships, 'while the merchant shipping under the Free French Flag totaled 170 ships and 700,000 tons in all. As for the air force, it was not until the spring of 1941 that independent units could be formed, though many French pilots had fought with the Royal Air Force before then'²¹. Furthermore by mid-August 1940, the Free French Army only consisted of two thousand two hundred and fifty officers and soldiers²². According to Robert Paxton, the sum total of the Gaullist movement in July 1940 amounted to only seven thousand and from the end of 1940 until November 1942, it was

¹⁸ Lacouture, *De Gaulle: The Rebel*, p.248.

¹⁹ Charles Williams, *The Last Great Frenchman: A Life of General de Gaulle* (London, 1993), p.120.

²⁰ Paxton *Vichy France*, p.44.

²¹ A. Hartley *Gaullism: The Rise and Fall of a Political Movement* (London, 1970), p.59.

²² Williams *The Last Great Frenchman*, p.125.

approximately thirty-five thousand. Many men changed their minds about fleeing to join de Gaulle in London. Most of the future Gaullists would not make their commitment for years to come. ‘Genuine “resisters of the first hour” were a rare breed indeed in 1940’²³. Both de Gaulle and Muselier knew that without adequate numbers of soldiers and sailors, the Free French movement would not be taken seriously in Unoccupied France²⁴. Few people believed in the cause for which de Gaulle stood, and fewer still were prepared to acknowledge him as their leader²⁵.

The Mers-el-Kébir tragedy was not the only reason for a drop in recruitment but it proved to be the major reason for the dwindling numbers; ‘Operation Catapult’ as a whole was a devastating blow to de Gaulle and the Free French. The capture of the French naval ships at Alexandria and in British ports further exacerbated the situation of the southern French, as did the later attacks on the ‘Dunkerque’ at Dakar. However, as we shall discover in later chapters, the British and de Gaulle himself hampered the recruitment effort.

Unfortunately, most people in the unoccupied zone received news of de Gaulle and Mers-el-Kébir through French radio and newspapers, and these were already under the scrutiny of government censors. The Vichy Government made the most of the affair in the propaganda war. Their anti-de Gaulle and anti-British propaganda grew in abundance. Firstly, there was the publication on 7 July of the numbers of French casualties at Mers-el-Kébir on 3 and 6 July. Then, the film of the cemetery at Mers-el-Kébir with its 1,200-odd graves and crosses was often shown on the screen in France²⁶, and on 3 July 1941 a memorial service was held throughout France to commemorate the ‘martyrs’. An example of this propaganda appears on page twelve. They were determined to use the affair as much as possible to discredit de Gaulle and his Free French. However, there is the famous saying that ‘any publicity is good publicity’. The French Navy remained embittered and were assisted in this by constant reminders of the affair. It acted as a spur to the resistance at Dakar in September 1940 and in Syria the following year, and it may have even accounted for the French naval resistance during the Allies’ North African Landings in November 1942. The French were

²³ Paxton, *Vichy France*, p.44.

²⁴ Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre I: L’Appel 1940-1942* (Paris, 1954), p.78 and Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, p.20.

²⁵ FO 371 28270 1941 France File No.45 Z2846 Mr. Savery (British Embassy to Poland) to Mr. Roberts (09/04/41) ‘A Summary (March 1941) by Polish diplomat living in unoccupied France since the defeat, M. Cajetan Morawski’.

²⁶ FO 371 24321 1940 France File No.890 C9042 Telegram from Consul Livingstone (Geneva, 24 August 1940).



N'oubliez pas Oran!

Une affiche de propagande allemande sur Mars el-Khalil, traitée par Verdat.

Poster taken from Henri Michel, Vichy: Année 40 (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1966).

encouraged to protect their territory by the Germans who, as part of the propaganda machine, allowed for the suspension of Article Eight. On 4 July, Adolf Hitler allowed the French to keep their ships in full commission with full ammunition and fuel.

Later reports suggest that the Vichy Government and Nazi Germans' use of propaganda was very effective. In the Foreign Office records currently held at the Public Record Office in London, regular reports were forwarded about 'Opinion in France'. One such report, three months after Mers-el-Kébir, asserted that, 'Even Mers-el-Kébir is being brought back into the public eye, with the publication of a special brochure by 'L'Illustration'. Yet the state of public opinion on these incidents may be guessed from a French sailor's talk on Radio Paris; he complained that "people still believe that Mers-el-Kébir is an invention of German propaganda". The campaign against the 'anglophiles' and de Gaullists has not abated'²⁷. Although the sailor's view paints a negative view of Vichy and German policy, it also illustrates the lengths that they went to to exploit this incident. Many other listeners and readers did interpret this anti-British and anti-de Gaulle propaganda as fact.

The people of southern France were constantly under fire from Vichy propaganda but they also supported the Vichy Government more vehemently than the occupied French. It enabled the Vichy Government to exploit all the latent jealousy of the British Navy among French sailors and to present de Gaulle nakedly as a British tool²⁸ without being detected by their southern flock. Pétain spoke out against the Free French saying that they were more against Vichy France than against the Nazis. Pétain queried why, on the day before Mers-el-Kébir, de Gaulle had talked so much about the "glorious dead of the French Navy" in his radio broadcast. Pétain was suspicious of de Gaulle for de Gaulle had said that in former times the old heroes of the Navy had never delivered their fleet intact to the enemy²⁹. 'If the Marshal could not stomach Gaullism, it was because, like many at Uriage, he could not forgive Mers-el-Kébir, Dakar and Syria'³⁰. Furthermore, at Vichy, 'il ne manquait pas d'hommes politiques et surtout de militaires pour susurrer aux oreilles de Pétain, volontiers attentif, que l'opération de Mers-el-Kébir avait été soufflée aux Anglais par "le général félon"'. Churchill n'en avait pas moins une dette d'honneur envers le général de

²⁷ FO 371 24314 1940 France File No.65 C11253, French Intelligence Section 'Opinion in France 29 September – 13 October 1940'.

²⁸ *Le Temps* (Édition de Clermont-Ferrand, 26 September 1940), p.1.

²⁹ White, *Seeds of Discord*, p.87.

³⁰ Captain Pierre Dunoyer de Segonzac quoted in W.D. Halls, *The Youth of France* (Oxford, 1981), p.395.

Gaulle³¹. Even staunch anglophiles such as Puaux, the High Commissioner of Syria, and others in the service of Vichy, were dismayed and badly shaken. The majority of people in unoccupied France supported Pétain and his government in 1940 and would not believe in anything contrary to the Marshal's opinions. The effect of this was still partly felt in 1942, when POW's in Madagascar were asked for their views on the Free French and the British. 'Many didn't want to join the Free French as they preferred captivity to committing what they regard as an act of betrayal of their military superiors and government....Mers-el-Kébir and the seizure of the French ships in British ports were grave errors of judgment in his view, and the only thing the British could do was to say nothing and hope that the pressure of current events would cause the French gradually to forget'³².

The basic facts of the Mers-el-Kébir incident and the Vichy propaganda led to many southern French blaming de Gaulle for advising the British to undertake the 'tragédie'. In the Clermont-Ferrand edition of 'Le Figaro' on 5 July 1940, a French columnist wrote that England 'a été mal inspirée ou peut-être mal conseillée par les Français de Londres'³³. De Gaulle and the Free French movement were portrayed and viewed as traitors. H.R. Kedward illustrates this quite clearly about the southern French people. He explains that, 'Partly because of Mers-el-Kébir, and the resulting Anglophobia, partly because the broadcasts became the object of official Vichy antagonism and technological interference from the Germans, and partly because the general philosophy of a confused and demoralised public was not to upset what little equilibrium remained, it quickly became a sign of opposition to call oneself a Gaullist, whether one knew anything about de Gaulle or not'³⁴. In his speech of 8 July, de Gaulle grieved for the loved ones of the dead at Mers-el-Kébir but accepted that the action taken was necessary to the British. He expressed the opinion that, 'Il n'y a pas le moindre doute que, par principe et par nécessité, l'ennemi les aurait un jour employés, soit contre l'Angleterre, soit contre notre propre Empire. Eh bien! Je dis sans ambages qu'il vaut mieux qu'ils aient été détruits! J'aime mieux savoir, même le 'Dunkerque', notre beau, notre cher, notre puissant 'Dunkerque', échoué devant Mers-el-Kébir que de le voir un jour, monté par les Allemands, bombarder les ports anglais ou bien Alger, Casablanca, Dakar'³⁵. This led to a major difference of opinion

³¹ Marc Ferro, *Pétain* (Paris, 1987), pp.160-1.

³² FO 898/210, Lieutenant C.A. Whitney-Smith's visit to the crew of the submarine Ajax (in POW Camp 24, 11-12 June 1942, Madagascar).

³³ *Le Figaro*, "Les Conséquences d'un geste" (Edition de Clermont-Ferrand, 5 July 1940), p.1.

³⁴ Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France*, p.210.

³⁵ De Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre I*, p.276.

with the unoccupied zone. Only a few of his compatriots sympathised with him. This speech of 8 July also confirmed many French opinions that de Gaulle had had a hand in Operation 'Catapult' and this alienated them from the Free French as well as from the British³⁶.

Other Frenchmen believed that de Gaulle had not worked with the British but had incited them to attack the French port. The basic premise for this accusation originates from the opinion of the Gaullists in late June regarding the French Fleet. The Free French thought that Article Eight envisaged surrendering the French Fleet to the Germans. As Muselier put it, 'Naval units were to be disarmed in their port of commissioning and almost all had been commissioned in the northern ports, occupied by the Germans'³⁷. However, General Huntziger received an oral amendment allowing the disarming of the fleet to take place in southern ports. When dining with Churchill on 16 June, de Gaulle said, 'Quoi qu'il arrive, lui dis-je, la flotte française ne sera pas volontairement livrée. Pétain lui-même n'y consentirait pas. D'ailleurs, la flotte, c'est la fief de Darlan. Un féodal ne livre pas son fief'³⁸. This belief by the Free French may have been one of the causes of the incident at Oran in Algeria. This is backed up by Admiral Menzies, Chief of the British Intelligence Service, who, after the war asserted that, 'We had false information which said the French Fleet was to be ceded to the Germans. Don't forget, also, that the French in London had helped to create a particular state of mind, by declaring that the fleet was going to fall into German hands'³⁹. 'P.L. Bret inquired whether, in saying over the radio that the French government would surrender its fleet, de Gaulle had not involuntarily influenced the decision of the P.M.'⁴⁰. On the other hand, many have stated, including Aidan Crawley, Hervé Coutau-Bégarie and Claude Huan, that the Free French view would not have made the slightest difference to Churchill. For him, it was simply a question of British security.

The phrase 'Anglo-Gaullism'⁴¹ sums up what some French people thought of de Gaulle and his movement. They believed that de Gaulle was working for and with the British, assisting British imperialism and being to some extent controlled by Churchill and his Government. To back their points up, de Gaulle had throughout this traumatic period emphasised the need for a Franco-British Alliance. His speeches on

³⁶ FO 371 24314 C11691, Postal Censorship Reports 'Unoccupied France' No.86 (15 November, 1940): 'La Chapelle-Pontenevaux'.

³⁷ Vice Admiral Muselier quoted in J-R. Tournoux, *Pétain and de Gaulle* (London, 1964), p. 124.

³⁸ De Gaulle *Mémoires de Guerre I*, p.61

³⁹ Admiral Stewart Menzies quoted in Tournoux, *Pétain and de Gaulle*, p.124.

⁴⁰ Paul-Louis Bret, 'Au Feu des Evénements' (Paris, 1959) p.183 quoted in White, *Seeds of Discord*, p.87.

⁴¹ Azéma, *From Munich to the Liberation*, p.211.

the radio and at Oxford University emphasise this. 'If de Gaulle could criticize Vichy as being a puppet government for Berlin, it was obvious that Vichy would answer that Free France was controlled by the British – by the hated British that had attacked their fleet at Oran'⁴². It was not just the Communists who viewed de Gaulle as a mercenary in the pay of British imperialists⁴³

For the most part, from 1940-1942, the Mers-el-Kébir incident provoked negative reactions to de Gaulle's movement. However there were some southern French people who approved of the British action at Oran and some positive aspects for de Gaulle that can be extracted from the incident. Interviewed in 1971, a 'Marseillaise' stated that she had 'approved of the English attack on the French Fleet at Mers-el-Kébir. I understood why the English had done it. The French Fleet ought to have gone over to the English side in defiance of the Armistice'⁴⁴. In his memoirs, Churchill later wrote, 'In a village near Toulon dwelt two peasant families, each of whom had lost their sailor son by British fire at Oran. A funeral service was arranged to which all their neighbours sought to go. Both families requested that the Union Jack should lie upon the coffins side by side with the Tricolour, and their wishes were respectfully observed. In this we may see how the comprehending spirit of simple folk touches the sublime'⁴⁵. Furthermore, Pierre Laborie, a specialist in French public opinion, has written that by the end of 1940, 'Malgré le drame de Mers-el-Kébir, l'affaire de Dakar et le poids d'un discours anglophobe, la majorité de l'opinion reste favorable à la cause britannique et souhaite ouvertement sa victoire face à l'Allemagne'⁴⁶.

There were some positive aspects for de Gaulle that resulted from the Mers-el-Kébir incident. De Gaulle profited from the breaking off of communication between Pétain's government and Great Britain on 5 July 1940. Their relations would never be the same again and it also meant that the southern French understood the situation much more clearly. It was now slightly more apparent to them that de Gaulle and the British were co-operating with each other, that it seemed unlikely that the Marshal and the General were working together against Germany, and that divisions were beginning to emerge between the Marshal and the Gaullists. Speaking of de Gaulle's speech of 8 July, Aiden Hatch noted that, 'By his extremely intelligent

⁴² G.E. Maguire, *Anglo-American Policy towards the Free French* (Hampshire and London, 1995), p.5.

⁴³ *L'Humanité* No. 107 (Édition de zone sud) 'A bas la guerre imperialiste' (Limoges, 29 May 1941), p.1.

⁴⁴ Interview of Mlle. Madeleine Baudouin, 6 September 1971, Marseille, quoted in Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France*, p.276.

⁴⁵ A story told by M. Teitgen, member of the Resistance Movement, quoted in Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Vol. II – Their Finest Hour* (London, 1949), p.212.

⁴⁶ Pierre Laborie, *L'opinion française sous Vichy* (Paris, 1990), p.239.

handling of the tragic and delicate situation which might well have ruptured the fragile entente between Free France and her only ally, de Gaulle for the first time proved that as a statesman he might be arrogant and unbending, but he would never go beyond what was possible'⁴⁷. However, it took a long time for the southern French to get over what they termed a 'tragedie'. 'Rare were the Frenchmen after Mers-el-Kébir who, like General Laure, in his prison camp, clung to the hope that "Bordeaux and London will find a way to get together even after Mers-el-Kébir which must have been the momentary result of a reciprocal lack of understanding"'⁴⁸. Even so, they grew in numbers as time and events went by.

Though de Gaulle and the Free French were greatly affected by the incident, it must not be forgotten that the main responsibility for Mers-el-Kébir lay on the shoulders of the British. They bore the brunt of the criticism and Anglophobia swept through unoccupied France in July 1940. Press reports in the 'free' zone were very unfavourable to the British. Though far from favourable to the Germans, they could not conceal their anger and scorn. Some newspapers even wrote that 'Mers-el-Kébir has restored to France her liberty of action'⁴⁹. Misleading and even false information was utilised by the soon-to-be-called 'Vichy Government' against the British. 'Le Figaro', under the 'Récit Officiel du Combat' written by Admiral François Darlan, stated that Vice-Admiral Gensoul received the following incorrect ultimatum:- 'ou bien rallier la flotte anglaise ou bien détruire les bâtiments dans les six heures pour qu'ils ne tombent pas entre les mains de l'Allemagne ou d'Italie. En cas de refus les Anglais nous contraindraient par la force à cette destruction'⁵⁰. The speech by Vice-Admiral Gensoul at the Mers-el-Kébir cemetery was used to full effect by the propagandists: 'Vous avez promis d'obéir à vos chefs pour tout ce qu'ils vous commanderaient pour l'honneur du pavillon et la grandeur des armes de la France. Si, aujourd'hui, il y a une tache sur un pavillon, ce n'est certainement pas sur le nôtre'⁵¹. 'La Perfide Albion' was personified by Winston Churchill who bore the brunt of the blame, not only from the French but from the British Navy. Churchill later wrote, 'This was a hateful decision, the most unnatural and painful in which I have ever been concerned'⁵². Finally, not all French people coupled de Gaulle with the British. Many Frenchmen thought

⁴⁷ Aiden Hatch, *The De Gaulle nobody knows: An intimate biography of Charles de Gaulle* (New York, 1960), p.111.

⁴⁸ Unpublished manuscript of General Laure 'Des Fronts de 1939-1940 à la Haute Cour de 1948' (diary), p.6, quoted in Adrienne Hytier, *Two Years of French Foreign Policy, Vichy 1940-1942* (Geneva and Paris, 1958), p.67.

⁴⁹ *Le Figaro*, 'Les Conséquences d'un Geste' (5 July 1940), p.1.

⁵⁰ Admiral Darlan's communiqué quoted in *Le Figaro* (5 July 1940), p.1.

⁵¹ Vice-Admiral Gensoul's speech (5 July 1940) quoted in *Le Figaro* (4 August 1940), p.2.

⁵² Churchill, *Second World War Vol. II*, p.206.

that the British were solely responsible for the 'tragédie' and that de Gaulle's speech on 8 July was anti-British⁵³. They viewed the Free French and the British as totally separate entities.

To conclude, we must evaluate two historians' opinions on the subject of how important Mers-el-Kébir was in the months and years that lay ahead. Warren Tute explains that, 'In France herself, still numbed by the shock of defeat; with the country slashed into two zones; with a million and a half of her men P.O.W's; with communications disrupted and a population dazed beyond measure by what had happened to them in the last two months: the outrage of Mers-el-Kébir passed as just one further calamity to which the only reaction was that it was incomprehensible. They had all been through too much.... The memory of Mers-el-Kébir became submerged in the torrent of daily events. What had been done was not forgotten; it was simply and for a time overlaid⁵⁴. In the context of what people thought in the free zone, this is untrue. The politicians appear to have been deeply affected by Mers-el-Kébir, and this reaction made them less disposed to resist the granting of full powers to Pétain a week later. The French people followed the politicians' lead. They lapped up the anti-British and anti-de Gaulle propaganda and memories of the incident lingered on in their consciousness, assisted by Vichy's constant reminders⁵⁵ and the further blunders of Great Britain and the Free French forces. Inadequate communication was quite a serious crime attributed to Vice-Admiral Gensoul in the Mers-el-Kébir incident, but the last person that Pétain and the French people would blame would be one of their own Admirals. De Gaulle may well have been the perfect French scapegoat for Pétain's government, taking the place of Gensoul who was never held accountable for his mistake.

In 1958, Adrienne Hytier wrote the following:- 'French public opinion was sadly troubled by Mers-el-Kébir; only the staunch resisted the event and the clever made use of it. But this was, after all, only moral damage and any evaluation of it in material results is impossible'⁵⁶. This was not, after all, 'only' moral damage. It was a disaster for Britain and de Gaulle. In general, the French people take morality very seriously. The moral damage which was inflicted upon them would have been tremendous. If at first their consciences had told them to support de Gaulle and the Allied cause, they would have suffered from a

⁵³ Jean Boutron, De Mers-el-Kébir à Londres: 1940-1944 (Paris, 1980), pp.127-128 and Albert Vulliez, Mers-el-Kébir (Paris, 1975), p.272.

⁵⁴ Warren Tute, The Deadly Stroke (London, 1973), pp.205-210.

⁵⁵ op'cit, pp.11-13.

⁵⁶ Hytier, Two Years of French Foreign Policy, p.68

moral crisis:- whether to carry on supporting what many people now branded the 'traitors', or to follow paternalistic Pétain and his "all-French" government⁵⁷.

Apart from a few positive aspects, Mers-el-Kébir gravely affected the popularity of the Gaullists in unoccupied France. Although the French population had fewer misgivings about whose side Pétain and de Gaulle were on, they were still shocked by the 'massacre'. In 1940, de Gaulle was seen by many as a British lackey who served British imperial interests. Many thought that he had had a hand in the Mers-el-Kébir incident or had incited it to take place. People were even less inclined to rally to the Free French than before and had it not been for de Gaulle's tenacity and courage, his movement would have been strangled at birth. The German and Vichy propaganda used against de Gaulle further hindered his popularity stakes, and after Dakar and before Montoire in late September to October 1940, de Gaulle's popularity in southern France stood at an all-time low while Pétain was revered everywhere he went. It was only as time went by, especially in 1942, that the people in the unoccupied zone started to forgive and forget whatever they blamed de Gaulle for in the 'massacre'.

Mers-el-Kébir made de Gaulle very unpopular in the 'free' zone. It was a serious threat to his movement's survival. A hole had been dug for his political grave. De Gaulle would have to make sure that, ultimately, the Vichy Government fell into it; but not without some help from external sources.

⁵⁷ op cit, pp.14-16.

The Progress of the Free French Movement.

Mers-el-Kébir was an external event which greatly affected de Gaulle and the Free French Movement. External events were influential, as were the internal actions and policies of the Free French themselves. This chapter will study the ways in which internal events within the Free French Movement affected support for Gaullism in unoccupied France.

There is a classic scenario that has been passed down from the generations of Gaullists to an at first willing French public⁵⁸. Charles de Gaulle was the first resister: he bravely left France on 16 June 1940, commandeering an aeroplane to take him to London. On 18 June 1940, he broadcast his 'appel' on BBC Radio to the French nation and this provoked a tremendous reaction in the provinces, not least increasing resistance numbers. As the weeks passed by, more and more people answered de Gaulle's call to arms and he was able to gain many French colonial possessions. The French nation were a nation of resisters who looked to de Gaulle for leadership and support.

Unfortunately, the truth was very different. In a hastily put together last minute escape plan, de Gaulle asked permission and was allowed to fly on General Spears' aeroplane back to London from Bordeaux but to be sure that he was not captured, he lay low until just before the plane took off and jumped onto the plane as it careered down the runway. After a few major disagreements about allowing de Gaulle to broadcast his speech on the radio, the British decided to grant him one speech on 18 June. However, the initial reaction to his 'appel' was very poor and his gains from the French Empire were more out of desperation for increasing the numbers of Free French recruits and inheriting some French soil to use as a base than for any reasons of prestige or greatness. The whole Free French operation was, in the very beginning, not much short of a fiasco⁵⁹.

Many French people feared that they themselves would become traitors if they joined de Gaulle's Free French Movement. People in France considered two conceptions. The first one was that the people who had joined de Gaulle had 'taken refuge in flight'⁶⁰, not really knowing what they were letting themselves in for. They only knew that de Gaulle was actively seeking to resist the Nazis. The second conception was that

⁵⁸ De Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre I* (1954) is an example of the glorification of Gaullism.

⁵⁹ Major-General Sir Edward Spears, *Two men who saved France: Pétain and de Gaulle* (London, 1966) is more realistic about de Gaulle's initial 'appel'.

⁶⁰ Halls, *The Youth of Vichy France*, p.396.

these people had not considered that de Gaulle had allied himself with a nation stigmatised by capitalist propaganda. They wondered whether they could resist Vichy from within France, in a more secretive way, than by remaining in London. They did not find de Gaulle's proposals particularly appealing. They found it extremely difficult to accept that there existed a national government outside of France and they were also apprehensive about establishing a resistance centre in England as it might jeopardise future endeavours within the French Empire. Some people even thought that staying in England was treason and that if England was defeated or if Vichy rule remained in post-war France, they would be punished or denied French citizenship.

From a survey of letters to the United States, the Foreign Office found that de Gaulle was not often mentioned in letters from France. Of the letters which did refer to him, comments were 'enthusiastic, faintly contemptuous and actively hostile in equal proportions'⁶¹.

Even though de Gaulle was hoping to woo Pétain's followers by moderating his attitude to Vichy, he was still perceived as a traitor by many who viewed his distaste for Pétain and his regime as scandalous. However, the Free French Movement fought not just against the armistice and the Vichy regime but also against the Nazi enemy and he struggled for recognition from the Allies as the legitimate representative of the French State as well as protecting French interests from any of his own Allies' imperial intentions. It could be said that de Gaulle was fighting too many people at once and suffered because of it. With such opposition, it is not surprising that de Gaulle was branded a traitor.

General Spears noticed that de Gaulle was not popular in France because 'the more individuals felt the lash his courage inflicted on their cowardice, the more bitter they were'⁶². They would insult him, referring to him as a charlatan and attributing his treasonable acts to the days when he was an unpopular army officer and to his resentment at being put in his place by the Marshal. The General was also misunderstood on occasion; he was thought of as dictatorial⁶³. The population of France only knew him as a voice on the radio and most could not believe how much he assumed. There was, naturally, little liking for rebels in the French Army and de Gaulle was held in low esteem by most of them and a few of them were very hostile

⁶¹ FO 371 24314 C11691 Postal Censorship Reports 'Unoccupied France' No.86 (15 November, 1940). Also refer to Postal Censorship Reports 'Letters to USA' No.82 (25 October, 1940), C12516 Captain Colbert quoted from His Majesty's Ambassador at Lisbon in Minute by Naval Attaché H.D. Owen 'Public Opinion in France' (25 November, 1940), and FO 371 28268 French File No.45 Z117 Despatch to Anthony Eden from Consul General Francis Patron (30 December 1940, Barcelona).

⁶² Spears, Two men who saved France, p.141.

⁶³ Bidault, Resistance, p.80.

towards him. A major question which must be debated is whether de Gaulle was aware of the importance of public opinion in unoccupied France in 1940. Professor Nicholas Wahl, a political expert from America, believed that Free France's higher standing and importance was due to de Gaulle's instant understanding of the spirit of resistance in France in 1940. Others, including Henri Frenay, were confident that de Gaulle only became aware of the importance of French public opinion after Jean Moulin's first visit to France in the autumn of 1941. Jean Lacouture considered that even though de Gaulle tried to persuade the French people that without him there would be no resistance, he still quickly formed links between himself and the Resistance so that by the end of 1940, Captain Passy and his agents were able to relay back to him that the first signs of resistance and hopes for self-liberation had stirred in France⁶⁴.

Perhaps de Gaulle was named a traitor because he was not well-known or was feared by many in France. They did not understand the man behind the BBC microphone. He was an 'inconnu' and so were many of those who joined the Free French Movement. Hardly anyone in France listened to de Gaulle's 'call to resistance' on 18 June 1940. France was in chaos at that time with millions of refugees fleeing southwards and westwards and continued fighting leading to utter confusion. There were not many people listening to the BBC radio broadcasts at that time. However, we must not forget that the appeal was chiefly addressed to French soldiers stranded in England. A great proportion of Frenchmen who travelled to England to fight on had not come across de Gaulle's name before, including the unknown Captain Dewavrin ('Passy') who refused the English pressure put upon him to enter their Intelligence Service. They laid insults against de Gaulle's movement but Passy decided to join de Gaulle instead.

Charles de Gaulle suffered from his rather insignificant past. He had not attained the rank, reputation, power, authority or legality to introduce his policies which stemmed mostly from the Right. He knew this himself and at first he tried to find a leader who was superior to him and could attract more support to the cause. The announcement of 28 June 1940 which recognised de Gaulle as the leader of the Free French organisation did in fact expose to the world the failure of any senior personality to undertake further resistance in the name of France with promised British assistance. The French people were supposedly unaffected by him according to a Postal Censorship Report which stated that 'from the general lack of

⁶⁴ Lacouture, *De Gaulle: The Rebel*, pp.255-6.

reference to the movement of Free Frenchmen, it seems probable that to a great many Frenchmen living in France – immersed in their present troubles – Charles de Gaulle is little more than a name⁶⁵.

Those who did actively join de Gaulle's new movement had to believe and adhere to certain ideas. They had to find the recent French compromises alarming and be willing to fight against these decisions. They needed to be willing to fight against the existing French state. Another prerequisite of this 'esprit français libre'⁶⁶ was to agree to an affiliation with de Gaulle but also to put up with his fits of rage, his coldness and his rudeness. Even de Gaulle recognised that his movement was really a 'one-man show' due to the fact that not many people matched the selection criteria of the Free French organisation. This 'one-man show' certainly attracted a mixed crowd; some were not at all sympathetic to democracy and republicanism while others seemed to be playing a double and pro-Vichy game. Most of them were anonymous patriots who had no pre-war standing and were members of the working classes. Principally, they came from Paris, Alsace and Lorraine, but most of all from Brittany. The majority of men from Brittany were merchant seamen and fishermen and by September, they constituted two thirds of the number of men who joined the Free French forces. These new recruits also found de Gaulle's attitude very icy and whatever the reasons behind it, a gulf now opened between de Gaulle and the rest of his movement. By the end of 1940, the Gaullist movement amounted to thirty-five thousand but most of these were from Equatorial Africa and not from France. Most of these men were new men who were suddenly thrust into positions of authority. There were very few genuine resisters of the first hour and even fewer who were from France.

De Gaulle came up against a lot of resentment amongst Frenchmen in England. Vice-Admiral Muselier always heard the same comments from them: 'Pourquoi restons-nous ici à ne rien faire? Puisque la guerre est finie, pourquoi ne rentrons-nous pas en France?'⁶⁷. The sailors were disinterested in what de Gaulle had to say and during the vast amount of spare time that they had, they listened to and concurred with the Vichy government broadcasts on the radio and were angered by the forced eviction from their ships.

One of the reasons for the lack of Free French numbers partly concerned the Gaullist leaders themselves. Many former Navy men would not join the Free French navy because they did not like Muselier⁶⁸ and

⁶⁵ FO 371 24314 C11691 Postal Censorship Report No.82 'Letters to USA' (25 October, 1940).

⁶⁶ Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, *La France Libre: De l'Appel du 18 juin à la Libération* (Paris, 1996), p.96.

⁶⁷ Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, p.22.

⁶⁸ White, *Seeds of Discord*, p.215.

others were driven away because they disliked de Gaulle, an opinion shared by Muselier⁶⁹. There were also pitfalls in joining the Free French. The men thought that revenge might be taken against their families and therefore felt that they were needed at home; Vichy officials contacted Gaullist recruits in London to confirm their worst fears. For the individual volunteers, it was no small matter that as soldiers of a Free French army, they had no claim to be treated as Prisoners of War if captured. They did not want to get mixed up with politics by enlisting with de Gaulle and many chose to enlist in the British forces instead. The Free French recruits were a small minority of the exiled Frenchmen in England who disapproved of the armistice. This was due to the stigma of supporting a dissident and dishonoured ex-general.

Of the men who joined the higher ranks of the Free French Movement, many were power-hungry adventurers and intriguers. This led to petty arguments, false accusations and disunity among the higher and lower ranks. Vice-Admiral Muselier, one of the principal leaders of the Free French Movement, has laid all the blame for the disorganisation of the movement on the intentional deviousness of the general. While de Gaulle was away in Africa in the autumn of 1940, Muselier believes he deliberately tried to make himself indispensable but only made his movement more unpopular because of its ineffectiveness without him. With three men sharing the power of 'La France Libre' in London and Muselier being the superior of the three, there was a lot of conflict. Muselier later wrote, 'Il [de Gaulle] divisait ses principaux collaborateurs, les dressait contre les autres et créait un état de fait qui...ne pouvait que diminuer l'autorité que j'aurais dû avoir, comme le plus anciens de ses officiers généraux, dans un mouvement qui, aux termes mêmes de l'accord du 7 août, était un mouvement purement militaire'⁷⁰. This situation was exacerbated by the initial problems of de Gaulle's embryonic military intelligence office headed by Passy whose first mission was to report on German preparations for the invasion of Britain. These undercover men had four tries and four failures, a result which disheartened the Free French recruits and annoyed the British.

The Gaullist movement was badly organised. An ideology did exist and its basic message was a powerful and uncomplicated one: the primacy of the national interest, the importance of collaboration between social classes, and the necessity of a post-war renewal of parliamentary institutions and political élites⁷¹.

However, in 1940, de Gaulle had no interest in developing a political agenda. He wanted to fight for victory

⁶⁹ White, *Seeds of Discord*, p.210, 226.

⁷⁰ Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, pp.93-4.

⁷¹ Andrew Shennan, *Plans for Renewal 1940-1946* (Oxford, 1989), p.54.

first and then worry later about the politics of the matter. He also wanted to attract as many people as possible to his movement. He did not discuss democracy because he knew how unpopular the Third Republic still was. Without a political manifesto to speak of, people in France mistrusted de Gaulle and his followers⁷². They did not know what he would do if he became leader after the war had ended. They could only go off facts and they were not particularly appealing, especially the fact that the British Government was his sole financial and material benefactor and that if it was not for Churchill's support, de Gaulle would probably become a 'nobody' again. De Gaulle's policy led to people in unoccupied France believing that he was not effective as a leader.

In the autumn of 1940, when de Gaulle gained a stronghold in the French Empire, it was viewed by most people in unoccupied France as an attempt to steal the French Empire. De Gaulle also seemed disinterested in gaining a foothold in unoccupied France. In 1940, Free France gained a number of new territories from the French Empire. By the end of the year, they had taken possession of the New Hebrides, the 'Comptoirs Français' in India, Tahiti, the French territories of Océanie, New Caledonia and French Equatorial Africa, the Chad, the Cameroons and Congo-Brazzaville. De Gaulle assumed sole authority over all these territories but did not find it easy to persuade the colonies to submit to him. Dissidence was not respected in the colonies as much as in metropolitan France. When the Free French finally gained a foothold in Equatorial Africa in the name of 'La France Libre', this opinion in France and the French Empire changed to one of lack of enthusiasm for de Gaulle's new venture. Weygand later wrote that de Gaulle liked to stir things up in France with his inaccurate portrayals of Nazi pressure on Vichy colonial possessions⁷³. This made de Gaulle very unpopular in Vichy circles and the French government tried to scupper the Gaullists' chances of success in the empire.

The French Empire ensured the survival of Gaullism according to one of de Gaulle's most loyal followers, Gaston Palewski. He thought that de Gaulle would have become a stateless exile and tool of the British had he not been acknowledged in the French Empire. Palewski remarked that 'it all really began in Africa'⁷⁴. De Gaulle could now more truly state that he was speaking 'in the name of France' even though most Frenchmen still believed this to be preposterous.

⁷² FO 371 24314 C12599 Letters from Professor Albert Beguin of Basle, a cousin (Louis) and a peasant in Telegram from Mr. Kelly (Berne, 24 November, 1940).

⁷³ Maxime Weygand, *Mémoires: Rappelé au Service* (Paris, 1950), p.332.

⁷⁴ Gaston Palewski quoted in Crawley, *De Gaulle*, p.127.

De Gaulle's conquest of the French Empire also brought about his most humiliating military failure of the Second World War. Free France's joint expedition with British forces to Dakar in September 1940 met with a resounding defeat at the hands of Vichy forces determined to sustain Vichy rule in Dakar. De Gaulle's agents had sent back reports that the population at Dakar were mostly in favour of the general. These reports were very inaccurate. The appearance of three modern French cruisers at Dakar was blamed on a leak by the Free French in London. The British felt that they could not be trusted anymore and this reputation for security leaks became common knowledge in France. It is very difficult to conclude whether French people blamed de Gaulle or the British more for the Dakar failure. In Britain, newspapers laid the blame at Churchill's feet. One view is that the French Navy were out for revenge on the Royal Navy and they could not have cared less if de Gaulle got caught in the crossfire. A Postal Censorship Report from November 1940 confirms this opinion. From Tangier, a letter read: '[Dakar] has damaged de Gaulle's prestige somewhat. All the French papers try to make out that the whole thing was an English attack, and tend to put de Gaulle on one side as a tool of the English',⁷⁵.

Other newspapers laid the blame directly against the Free French leader: 'On pouvait penser que l'ex-général conduit les forces étrangères à l'attaque contre ses compatriotes. Ceux des français qui hésitaient encore à le considérer comme un traître ont désormais les yeux ouverts',⁷⁶ The world watched as Dakar defended itself in the name of the Marshal and repulsed de Gaulle who looked all alone at that point in time. Many French people believed that de Gaulle was the instigator of the attack and also the cause of its failure and therefore they never thought seriously about collaborating with him.

The Free French leader had played right into the hands of the Vichy authorities. They gloated over his failure and sent planes from Morocco to bomb Gibraltar as an act of defiance. Paul Baudouin feared, as no doubt many others did, that 'if Dakar falls, North Africa will soon be invaded by the Germans. This means a campaign in Africa and certainly the occupation of Marseilles and Toulon'⁷⁷. Referring to the promise by de Gaulle and his movement never to fight other Frenchmen, General Weygand later wrote, 'Comment le général de Gaulle a-t-il pu se décider à lancer contre des troupes françaises des soldats françaises entretenus

⁷⁵ FO 371 24314 C11691 Postal Censorship Report 'Unoccupied France' No.86 (15 November, 1940). Also refer to Le Temps (26 September, 1940), p.1.

⁷⁶ Le Figaro (25 September 1940), p.2.

⁷⁷ Paul Baudouin, The Private Diaries (March 1940 to January 1941) of Paul Baudouin (London, 1948; trans. Sir Charles Petrie), pp.246-7.

par l'Angleterre en vertu d'un accord spécifiant qu'ils ne devraient jamais être engagés contre leur compatriotes?'⁷⁸. De Gaulle had mentioned at the same time that as a last resort, Frenchmen would fight Frenchmen but he also used the argument that Vichy troops did not represent France and therefore were not French troops. This did not go down well in unoccupied France. The failure at Dakar was like taking two steps back for de Gaulle after he had taken his first step forward since Mers-el-Kébir. He had provoked a civil war. He was branded an assassin⁷⁹

However, it was not all doom and gloom for de Gaulle as he set up his Free French Movement. There were some positive aspects which arose from events in 1940. There were some demonstrations in France that supported de Gaulle's cause such as some student processions for de Gaulle in August and the procession of students who tried to lay a wreath on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier on 11 November 1940 in the name of de Gaulle but were stopped by French and German police; the Germans opened fire on the crowd killing several of them. This act of defiance became a spur to the Gaullist cause. De Gaulle's 'call' of June and July 1940 gave hope to Frenchmen who felt aggrieved by the armistice declaration. It was also published widely in unoccupied France. For instance, extracts were published by 'Le Progrès de Lyon' on 19 June and by 'Le Petit Provençal' in Marseilles. M.Louis de la Bardonnie said, 'I entered the Resistance from the moment I heard de Gaulle's first broadcast....when I realised what de Gaulle was saying I called out "We've won the war!" I had never heard of de Gaulle until that moment...' ⁸⁰. A P.R. agent, Richmond Temple, was also brought in by the British to improve de Gaulle's reputation.

De Gaulle could be proud of his movement and so could his supporters. La France Libre entered the war in a small way with the Free French Air Force bombing the Ruhr, which was a notable achievement in such a short space of time. De Gaulle's use of the BBC radio facilities more than anything else helped to establish his name and reputation. In the southern zone, listening to de Gaulle was not a crime until November 1940. This imposed ban made others more inquisitive to listen in to the BBC. Without the BBC, de Gaulle would probably have been a nobody according to Georges Bidault⁸¹. This exposure from the radio helped to instil some respect and sympathy from native French people when de Gaulle was

⁷⁸ Weygand, *Mémoires*, p.335.

⁷⁹ FO 371 24314 C11691 Postal Censorship Report 'Unoccupied France' No.86 (15 November, 1940) Letter from La Chapelle-Pontenevaux. ADM 116/4413 Cabinet Committee 277 Vol.I: M0374/41 Egyptian Dept No. 52.

⁸⁰ Interview of M.Louis de la Bardonnie (Dordogne, 20 September 1972) quoted in Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France*, p.251.

⁸¹ Bidault, *Resistance*, p.21.

condemned to death by the Vichy authorities. Worn wedding rings were sent over so that de Gaulle could sell them to help France liberate herself. Someone sent a picture of de Gaulle's mother's grave; she died in July 1940. The grave was heaped high with flowers and dedications to her and her son. Publications around the world reported that de Gaulle's popularity in France was growing. In December 1940, 'Time' remarked that de Gaulle's stature was growing in France and the 'New York Times' believed the number of Gaullist sympathisers in unoccupied France to be increasing⁸². At first, the Free French had to rely on such publications and censorship reports for news of Gaullist activity in unoccupied France⁸³.

There are other positive aspects of the first few months of the Free French Movement. The adoption of the Cross of Lorraine as an emblem for the movement in late July 1940 assisted de Gaulle in his attempt to create the embryo of a new French state. To give his organisation a semblance of legality, on 27 October 1940, de Gaulle issued a manifesto, two ordinances and a declaration which constituted the "Charter" of the Free French Movement. After returning from Africa, de Gaulle now believed in his own authority and was now convinced that he was the only man who could restore the prestige of France. The Empire also provided the Free French with a seat of government rather than them simply being a government in exile.

Despite all these positive aspects, de Gaulle's movement was probably at its most unpopular in 1940. Its origins were very unspectacular and Vichy's reputation was still very positive. At this point in time, the only way that Free France could show themselves to be legitimate was by illustrating the immorality of the Vichy government. They had no well-known personality from a previous regime to add credence to their claims. Vichy was seen as the legitimate government. Furthermore, de Gaulle's harsh and aloof style made him very unpopular in France as well as in London. It is untrue that the 'response to Gaullism was even less enthusiastic in 1941 and 1942 than it had been in 1940'⁸⁴.

Vice-Admiral Muselier has blamed all the misfortunes of 1940 on de Gaulle himself. He wrote, that when de Gaulle sent his bright young soldiers into battle, he dishonoured them by engaging them in a fratricidal battle against Vichy forces. He wished to suppress these ambitious young men so only he could be recognised as the incarnation of France. His insults against Vichy and calls to rally to his movement

⁸² 'Time' XXXVI No.24 (9 December 1940) and 'The New York Times' (18 September 1940), p.7 quoted in White, *Seeds of Discord*, pp.218-9.

⁸³ Refer to [FO 371 24314 C11691](#) Postal Censorship Report No.82 'Letters to USA', Postal Censorship Report No.86 'Unoccupied France' (15 November, 1940), and [C12761](#) Foreign Office Minute by Mr. Mack (22 November 1940).

⁸⁴ Paxton, *Vichy France*, p.240.

nearly drove Pétain into the arms of the Germans and nearly led to a Franco-British war⁸⁵. Muselier believes that de Gaulle was a dictator who cared about nothing but his own prestige. This is a highly biased opinion but it is true that de Gaulle did not make many friends in the early days of the Free French Movement. Then again, in 1940 de Gaulle was thinking more about future support than about the present insubstantial support that he had amassed in July. The Gaullists' classic scenario about how de Gaulle had the support of a French nation of resisters was utterly false. He was still all alone at the end of 1940 but by that time, he wanted to be alone so that he could become the embodiment of the French nation⁸⁶. De Gaulle set up his organisation in the hope that in future years people would start to support him. The formation of the Gaullist movement in 1940 was not successful in gaining support in unoccupied France. As we shall see in a later chapter, Pétain had gained the respect and loyalty of nearly all the southern French population. What the Free French did successfully was to chip away at the rock that Pétain stood on top of. Their very existence did reassure quite a few Frenchmen in unoccupied France that there were alternatives to collaboration.

⁸⁵ Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, p.390.

⁸⁶ Charles de Gaulle, *The Complete War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle, 1940-1946: Vol.I The Call to Honour* (New York, 1967), p.82.

Pétain's Counterweight: Vichy France.

De Gaulle's attempt to create a *résistance* movement and power base was severely threatened by Pétain's government at Vichy. His high profile meant that he became a perfect target for the Government's propaganda machine. The influence that the régime exerted weighed heavily on de Gaulle's shoulders, yet he decided from the outset that he would oppose it and try to turn the French people against it. This chapter will focus on how this groundbreaking decision and Vichy's response to it would greatly affect the extent of support for Gaullism in Unoccupied France.

The Vichy Government stood for national unity and its three watchwords were 'Travail, Famille, Patrie'. They wanted to oversee the regeneration of French society and the purification of the French nation. However, De Gaulle viewed their whole existence as an anathema to what decent Frenchmen should stand for. De Gaulle believed that the Vichy Government was guilty of treason for selling their country to the Nazis, for the harsh authoritarian policies which they subjected to their own people, for the destruction of the Republican constitution, and for their constant policy of bending the truth to suit their own needs. There were many ways in which the Vichy régime consciously and unconsciously affected the support for de Gaulle in Vichy France and there were many ways in which Vichy used the consequences of de Gaulle's actions to their advantage and disadvantage.

One of the aforementioned factors was the policy of the Vichy Government. What the Vichy politicians found very hard to deal with in France during their administration was the shortages of food. They had two major issues of contention. The Royal Navy blockaded French ports preventing food and supplies from entering the country. The second major issue was that the Germans were taking a large proportion of the food meant for the French people. The Vichy Government was obviously siding against the British blockade and, in addition, the subsequent anti-British propaganda may have damaged de Gaulle's prestige. However, it would seem from some reports that the Vichy Government itself was held responsible by the metropolitan population for the ration shortage which only seemed to be an urban problem⁸⁷. The Daily Mirror quoted information from a Swiss report: - 'There have been riots in unoccupied France and the collapse of rail and road transport, making food distribution impossible, is reducing the country to chaos. If

⁸⁷ FO 371 28270 Z1943 Ministry of Economic Warfare Report No.28 (12/03/41) "Economic Conditions in France".

the Vichy Government does not succeed in obtaining concessions from the Germans before the autumn, says the Basle “National Zeitung”, an internal crisis would appear inevitable’⁸⁸.

By the end of 1940, the régime’s authority had slumped badly due to Vichy’s misguided belief that Britain would surrender; this was the basic premise for the armistice. Throughout 1941 and 1942, their half-hearted collaboration provoked alarm in the French Empire and unsettled the French population. For instance, the sailors of the French Navy were tormented by the uncertain future of their fleet⁸⁹ and the people of France were also shocked by some of Vichy’s reasons for defending Syria, namely to assist in the German war effort⁹⁰. Pétain’s stance on franc-maçons led to an influential proportion of the population feeling isolated and unwelcome. The Revolution Nationale manifesto became a fiasco with hardly anyone believing in its proposals. The secretive and authoritarian measures that Vichy politicians employed caused constant antagonism between the people and themselves. The suddenness of these measures affected many; ‘purges’ were regularly entertained in southern France from the outset of defeat⁹¹. The clandestine newspaper ‘Les Petites Ailes’ stated that the Vichy Government had burnt their bridges in foreign affairs because they had agreed in principle to Hitler’s war against Russia so, it said, to distract people from the armistice. However, it stated that the war against Russia was not aimed at defeating communism as much as it was to create ‘lebensraum’ for the Nazis⁹². All of these issues added prestige to de Gaulle’s war effort and denigrated Vichy.

Vichy propaganda tried to make the compulsory labour service (STO) look materially advantageous but many Frenchmen were under no illusions as to what the STO would be like. There was divided opinion over this issue, just as there was over anti-Semitism. Only a minority lifted a finger to help the Jews; most people in southern France remained indifferent, submissive and even hostile to the moral protest of the minority⁹³. Vichy alienated much of their Catholic and Protestant support who were deeply affected by the mass deportations but many were glad that the Jews were being persecuted and not themselves. De Gaulle’s speech of June 1942 called for liberation and hinted for a return to republican ideology. His speech was

⁸⁸ Swiss report in *Daily Mirror* (London, 14 August 1940), p. 11.

⁸⁹ François Flohic, *Ni Chagrin ni Pitié: Souvenirs d’un marin de la France Libre* (Paris, 1985), pp. 67-8.

⁹⁰ Henri Amouroux, *Quarante Millions de Pétainistes: Juin 1940 – Juin 1941* (Paris, 1988), p. 451n.

⁹¹ *Daily Mirror*, ‘France Celebrates Victory’ (15 July 1940), p. 7.

⁹² *Les Petites Ailes* (Unoccupied zone, 1 July 1941).

⁹³ Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France*, p. 164.

considerably strengthened by the deportations of Jews in the same summer. This was bolstered by the Free French's message to decent Frenchmen in September which called for action and enlightened them on Vichy's anti-Semitic measures⁹⁴.

The collaboration between Vichy and the Nazis became the Vichy government's biggest millstone around its neck. Its obligation to Germany was such that unpopular policies were created, unpopular ministers were installed and unpopular decisions were made. Overall, de Gaulle and his organisation were able to use Vichy policy to their great advantage. Collaboration was a great burden to carry and de Gaulle benefited greatly from a discredited régime. For instance, the meeting between Hitler and Pétain at Montoire in October 1940 was a critical moment in the formation of public opinion which would later much advance the cause of Gaullism. De Gaulle and Laval's speeches of June 1942 contrasted sharply; one spoke of liberation and the other of German victory. This contrast was felt by a large number of Frenchmen. The policy most closely associated with the Vichy régime – that of Laval – was unpopular among the government's supporters. His policy of out-and-out collaboration with the Germans was frowned upon by the mass of conservative Catholic Frenchmen who preferred Pétain's vision of a regeneration of France, the technocrats' implementation of their own concepts and a return to the greatness of France. Vichy polarised France so that by late 1942, it had 'little more to parade in front of its audience than a blind confidence in Pétain and a series of legislative measures' which were bigoted and narrow⁹⁵. Vichy wasted their chance, did not make proper use of their opportunities, and lost what remained of their independence. They actively collaborated with the Germans, they censored the newspapers and they lost control of the French Empire.

The cracks began to show in Pétain's idealistic policies and the more cracks that appeared, the less likely it became that Vichy would resist and the less likely that the southern French would still support him. According to René Belin, who was Secrétaire du Travail then Ministre de la Production Industrielle et du Travail between 1940 and 1942, 'au fond, la critique essentielle contre Vichy se nourrit d'un refus de principe, d'un refus au nom de la morale, de ce qu'on nomme raison d'État'⁹⁶. This lack of focus and direction would benefit the Free French who seemed to many to have clear aims and objectives.

⁹⁴ Manchester Guardian, 'Vichy Deportation of Jews: Free French call to action' (Manchester, 2 September 1942), p.6.

⁹⁵ Kedward, Resistance in Vichy France, p.209.

⁹⁶ René Belin, Du Secrétariat de la C.G.T. au Gouvernement de Vichy: Mémoires 1933-1942 (Paris, 1978), p.194.

Furthermore, another paradox 'qui met en évidence l'une des contradictions du régime de Vichy...est que son appel incantatoire à l'unité va s'accompagner de toute une série de dénonciations et inspirer une politique de proscription, comme si l'unité ne pouvait être cimentée que par l'exclusion'⁹⁷. These contradictions would contribute to the slow disintegration of public support for Vichy. It would also bring others, including de Gaulle, into favour. The whole idea of Vichy would seem to be based on a farce.

However, it was quite difficult for the people of unoccupied France to understand what was going on inside France and around the world. The population was oblivious to many of Vichy's misdeeds and was left in the dark when it came to explaining the benefits of new unfavourable legislative measures effected by the Government. Like any government, they kept sensitive information secret. However, they worked very hard to show themselves in the best possible light. They self-consciously lied many times to protect their régime from adverse public opinion and they lied about others such as de Gaulle and the British to show them in a bad light. Many took the propaganda at face value and believed that Vichy wanted to remain neutral at all costs. This was accompanied by the Government's need for an early peace and a final settlement on concessionary terms with Hitler. Most Frenchmen would accept anything that was deemed 'to the benefit of France' at that time. The tactics that Vichy would favour were seen as underhand and indecent by some, but others would see the expected benefits from such measures⁹⁸. Up until the occupation of France, the vast majority of people may have grumbled about Vichy policy but still remained passive.

A policy which Vichy adopted and fostered was the 'double game' theory. This concept was very popular among the French people in the southern zone during the war. It was disliked by the Free French who wanted to convince the southern French population that only de Gaulle could restore France's prestige and honour. There were many double game theories which need to be considered.

Many people thought, rightly or wrongly, that Vichy was planning a double game by conceding to the Germans but also secretly planning to fight against them and help the Allied forces⁹⁹. In his memoirs,

⁹⁷ René Remond, 'L'opinion française des années 1930 aux années 1940. Poids de l'événement permanence des mentalités' in Jean-Pierre Azéma and François Bédarida (eds.) *Le Régime de Vichy et les Français* (Saint-Armand-Montrond, 1992), p.489.

⁹⁸ 'Note pour le Maréchal de France' (8 November 1940) quoted in Hervé Coutau-Bégarie and Claude Huan (eds.) *Lettres et Notes de l'Amiral Darlan* (Paris, 1993), p.248.

⁹⁹ Refer to FO 371 28271 French File No.45 (1941 France) Z3072 'Intelligence Report No.30 for French Section (Ministry of Information) Advisory Committee "Situation in France"' (15/04/41).

Weygand stated that Pétain hoped in secret for the cessation of hostilities in North Africa in 1942 and was in agreement with Darlan's stance on the matter¹⁰⁰. This concept of Allied and Vichy co-operation was reinforced by the consistent American support for the Vichy régime until late 1942. By fostering this support, Vichy was able to pacify many of their neighbours and dismiss de Gaulle as a traitor to France. De Gaulle was left out of the equation and this did great harm to his support base in the free zone; the French people took American opinion seriously.

Others believed that Vichy were actively involved in defending France by capitulating to and collaborating with the Nazis. There was evidence that French officials at Vichy seized upon popular Anglophobic sentiment in 1940 and used it as more than just a propaganda tool. 'In a world in which Germany seemed to be rising and Britain declining, France might be compensated overseas for what she was losing on the continent'¹⁰¹. The fact that Vichy willingly supported the Nazis in their war against Russia was viewed by many in the Résistance as a firm step towards collaboration¹⁰². Collaboration by Vichy can be viewed as having been undertaken to make the best of a bad situation with the good of France as their goal and to try and prevent greater German demands. In 1942, the Foreign Office received a report on Vichy officers' opinions¹⁰³. It claimed that the officers thought that Laval's 'real object is to defend France from further German aggression as far as may be, and that the worst statements he makes such as that "he hopes that Germany will win" are only part of his subtlety'. Vichy consciously tried to promote this view and succeeded up to a point. This concept was partly responsible for stalling de Gaulle's quest for popular support up until about 1942. It certainly added to his difficulties.

The factor that caused de Gaulle a great deal of harm but also may have benefited him was the idea that Pétain and de Gaulle were in fact working together on the liberation and regeneration of France. It was a picture of two Frances: one represented the fighting spirit, the other represented the defence of the state. For the most part, Vichy dispelled any notion of involvement with de Gaulle for many reasons including their need to be the legitimate and supreme authority in France. According to René Rémond, the

¹⁰⁰ Weygand, *Mémoires*, p.548. For an example of pro-Allies Vichy sentiment, refer to Fourneau quoted in FO 371 28224 1941 France File No.13 Z494 'French Views of M.Fourneau on situation in France': Military Attaché at Berne's report on Fourneau-Weygand conversation (14/01/41).

¹⁰¹ Paxton, *Vichy France*, p.57.

¹⁰² *Les Petites Ailes* 1 July 1941, 2°-5°.

¹⁰³ FO 898/210 Principal Points of POW Vichy Officers from Madagascar by E.L. Wharton (August 1942).

widespread view in France from 1940 to 1944 consisted of the sword and shield theory. French people wanted to believe that a secret agreement had been made between de Gaulle and Pétain and their previous personal relationship lent credence to the idea. Colonel Rémy, an ex-resister, and historian François-Georges Dreyfus are both advocates of this concept¹⁰⁴.

De Gaulle may have benefited from his name being linked with Pétain's name and a section of the French population hitherto unattainable may have started to support him because of this, but the double game theory as a whole did irreparable damage to his reputation. The theories of Vichy and Allied co-operation, of Vichy's own plans to liberate France, and of Vichy and Gaullist collaboration hindered de Gaulle. The people who he wanted to recruit or gain support from would not be attracted to de Gaulle if it seemed that he was a Vichy croney, or that he was not recognised by any other nations. One saving grace for de Gaulle was that by Vichy's capitulation in Syria, he could rightly claim that the Vichy régime had surrendered its French sovereignty and he had saved it; another was that the more unpopular that Vichy became, the less likely that the 'double game' theory was deemed true by the French public.

Vichy's propaganda tactics were used to great effect against de Gaulle and the Allies and to promote their own policies. Their methods of self-promotion were sometimes viewed as ingenious. The organised visits by Pétain to southern towns were, on the whole, a resounding success. Vichy also used the propaganda of the 'glorious' French Empire to better their reputation. It is very difficult to ascertain how much of this self-promoting image-making propaganda the public believed in but Pétain still seemed popular in the spring of 1944.

Pétain and his government used a variety of methods on a variety of different subjects to destroy the reputation of their adversaries, the British and de Gaulle. Their main methods were newspapers, posters and the radio. Newspapers played on the British abandoning France at Dunkirk and on them taking up arms against the French forces at Dakar. The Vichy press called Britain and the Gaullists of Dakar "the forces of dissidence". Their anti-British propaganda would contribute to the decrease in support for de Gaulle.

¹⁰⁴ René Remond, 'Two Destinies: Pétain and de Gaulle' in Hugh Gough and John Horne (eds.) *De Gaulle and Twentieth Century France* (London, 1994), pp. 14-15. Also refer to Colonel Rémy, *Dix ans avec de Gaulle* (Paris, 1971) and François-Georges Dreyfus, *Histoire de la Résistance 1940-1945* (Paris, 1996).

However, it was the direct propaganda against his movement and himself which would cause most harm to de Gaulle. The radio was used to good effect, especially when it came to broadcasting Vichy government speeches. A report by the Foreign Office illustrates the lengths that Vichy broadcasts would go to to discredit de Gaulle: -

‘Vichy’s new anti-de Gaulle campaign began with a talk on the signing of the Armistice in which the General was represented as a British agent. [The second talk was on Mers-el-Kébir]. The next talk dealt with the General’s role in the British plan to separate France from her colonial Empire. The fourth talk describes how the different territories had joined the General, representing their adhesion as due to British bribes, piracy and de Gaullist acts of rebellion. The fifth talk attacked the General’s speeches and propaganda. The final talk by Pétain boosted national unity’¹⁰⁵.

Vichy radio broadcasts were backed up by the Vichy-controlled press of the unoccupied zone. In the ‘Censure Consignes générales permanente pour la Presse’, guidelines were issued by Vichy to the press. Two of them were ‘Ne rien laisser passer sur de Gaulle et les émigrés en dehors des communications officielles’ and ‘les dépêches O.F.I. sur les émissions de la radio française en réponse à la dissidence doivent être insérées obligatoirement en bonne place’¹⁰⁶. Other newspaper reports branded Charles de Gaulle as an ‘anti-France’, a traitor, a British assassin, and supporter of capitalism and Jewry’¹⁰⁷. Vichy pamphlets were distributed which blamed the Gaullists for various atrocities¹⁰⁸. Furthermore, the Vichy Government issued anti-Gaullist measures which started the legal process of rounding up Gaullists, imprisoning them and shooting them¹⁰⁹. This propaganda stiffened the resolve of many Vichy soldiers to seek revenge on the Anglo-Gaullists¹¹⁰. It acted as a deterrent toward would-be Gaullists.

However, the effect of Vichy propaganda on the public was more than one-sided. Even though Vichy did not realise it, they were effectively promoting de Gaulle by actively discouraging people to support him. They also aided de Gaulle in negotiations. According to Passy in September 1942, ‘les attaques de la radio

¹⁰⁵ FO 371 28271 Z3135 ‘Intelligence Report No.29’ (Ministry of Information), 09/04/41.

¹⁰⁶ FO 371 31941 1942 France File No.81 Z5395 ‘Press Censorship in unoccupied France’ (from United States Consul at Lyons), Vice Presidence du Conseil, Secrétariat Générale à l’Information – ‘Censure’ Consignes générales permanentes pour la Presse

¹⁰⁷ Examples quoted in Michèle Cotta, *La Collaboration, 1940-1944* (Paris, 1964), pp. 205-212.

¹⁰⁸ ADM 116/4413 Cabinet Committee 277 Vol. I, M0374/41 – Egyptian Dept No.52 ‘Vichy propaganda amongst the French sailors at Alexandria’.

¹⁰⁹ Refer to FO 371 28272 1941 France File No.45 Z4265, Z4725, and FO 371 28273 1941 France File No.45 Z5271.

¹¹⁰ Refer to Azéma, *From Munich to the Liberation*, p.166.

de Vichy, accusant le général de Gaulle d'avoir livré Madagascar aux Anglais, confirmèrent celui-ci, s'il en était besoin, dans sa position, et lui donnèrent un argument supplémentaire vis-à-vis des Anglais'¹¹¹. When Hitler mentioned in a speech how things would be different in England without de Gaulle in the way, he was unintentionally personifying de Gaulle as a rebel with a cause¹¹². This speech would do no harm to the General's reputation. Furthermore, de Gaulle was able to change people's perceptions of him or at least question their reasoning. After the Vichy government had added to the dubiousness of the General's cause in August 1940 by condemning him to death, de Gaulle replied, 'I consider the act of the men of Vichy as entirely void. I shall have a settlement of accounts with them after the victory'¹¹³. This response was good publicity and propaganda for the Free French, it questioned the ruling and legality of the Vichy régime, and it turned the tables on the Vichy propagandists and on French public opinion at that time.

The propaganda in the southern zone newspapers was not as extreme and harsh as its counterparts in the northern zone according to Henri Amouroux. The commentaries and headlines were more measured and subdued, and some of their articles on the Vichy government were censored suggesting that they were providing too many real details and not sticking to Vichy censorship rules¹¹⁴. This may be part of the reason why Jean-Pierre Azéma and Olivier Wievorka believe that Vichy was successful until 1942. They have stated that 'jusqu'en 1942, l'État français n'avait prêté qu'une attention distraite à la dissidence'¹¹⁵ and that even though they took this attitude, they were hardly untroubled by Résistance and saboteurs' activities. According to Azéma and Wievorka, this situation changed in 1942 with the acquired audience of the BBC counterbalancing the effectiveness of Vichyist propaganda. The French public soon became aware of Vichy and German propaganda and would rather read underground newspapers and listen to British and American radio broadcasts to get a truer picture of the daily news¹¹⁶. Opinions may have been formed by the French population on de Gaulle that relied on instinct and prejudices rather than hard facts. Propaganda

¹¹¹ Colonel Passy, *Souvenirs Tome II: 10 Duke Street, Londres (le B.C.R.A.) Janvier 1942-novembre 1943* (Monte Carlo, 1947), p.250

¹¹² Hitler's speech mentioned in Henri Michel, *Vichy: Année 40* (Paris, 1966), p.309.

¹¹³ De Gaulle's reply quoted in *Daily Mirror*, 3 August 1940, p.2.

¹¹⁴ Henri Amouroux, *La Vie des Français sous l'Occupation: Tome II* (Paris, 1981), pp. 344-5. Example of censored article:- *Journal des Débats*, 'L'Avenir de la France' (7 July 1940), p.1.

¹¹⁵ Jean-Pierre Azéma and Olivier Wievorka, *Vichy 1940-1944* (Ligugé-Poitiers, 1997), p.226.

¹¹⁶ Refer to *Daily Express* 'I had to censor Pétain' by former French editor Michael Pobers (London, 6 August 1941), p.2, [FO 371 28270 Z2460](#) and John F. Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France: The French under Nazi Occupation* (Oxford, 1986), p.143.

would have played its part but the perceptions that people obtained from word-of-mouth, neutral or non-Vichy news reports and radio broadcasts may also have tarnished or preserved de Gaulle's good name.

Far from only responding to Vichy statements and actions, Charles de Gaulle actively engaged in undermining them from the very beginning of his stay in London. This may have at first turned the general public against him. By insulting the Pétain Government, the Free French were possibly making it worse for the government at the negotiating table with the Nazis. Support for de Gaulle in France made the Nazis aware that Pétain's government was not seen by all Frenchmen in the free zone as the legitimate authority and this discredited its belief that it could convince Hitler that it could stop the fighting, that it could maintain law and order in a free zone, in the French Empire and with a reduced army and navy.

On the other hand, Paul Baudouin thought that de Gaulle was threatening the neutrality of Vichy and that 'England and de Gaulle could not have acted differently had they wished to get round the armistice, to strengthen the hands of the Anglophobes and to throw the French government into the arms of Germany'¹¹⁷. Some Frenchmen may have agreed with this statement. De Gaulle may have been viewed by the French public as an uncompromising man who had shown no attempt to foster relations with the Vichy government; Vichy may have looked to some as the innocent party. At the time of the defeat, it was generally deemed unpatriotic to believe that Britain would not capitulate to the Germans, thereby implying that Britain was better than France. Due to the fact that the majority of Frenchmen were certain of Vichy's legality, this made de Gaulle a seditionist.

De Gaulle's activities in the French Empire were a mixed blessing to both his movement and to the Vichy régime. Weygand thought that de Gaulle tried to tarnish Vichy's reputation so much that he seriously threatened their potential allies, especially Britain. He believed that the power that de Gaulle possessed, to use radio and newspapers for his own ends, would create a barrier between the British and the Vichy régime¹¹⁸. Some people believed that the real resistance were the Vichy troops fighting in Dakar and Syria and not the self-exiled traitors of de Gaulle's Free French movement. Others would view the Syrian war in 1941 as de Gaulle striking a blow against the corrupt Vichy authorities, but the majority of people accepted Vichy's view that de Gaulle had simply reneged on his promise that Frenchmen would not fight against

¹¹⁷ Baudouin, *Private Diaries*, p.207.

¹¹⁸ Refer to Weygand, *Mémoires*, p.332; Baudouin and Pétain's opinions quoted in Baudouin, *Private Diaries*, pp.206-7.

other Frenchmen. In fact, the antipathy that the Vichy régime felt for de Gaulle caused him extra problems in Syria because Gaullist representatives were excluded from the negotiations at Acre apparently because the British feared that this might cause General Dentz to prolong the fighting. This would be a permanent source of contention between the Gaullists and British. Furthermore, the existence of the Free French movement strengthened Vichy's hand in one sense. The threat that de Gaulle posed over the Empire helped to destroy Hitler's plan of a grand coalition which all depended upon a distribution of the spoils which the French Empire was expected to provide. With the maintenance of the Empire under direct control from Vichy, they were able to bargain with the Germans that, 'if Vichy were to counter the Gaullist threat, it must have not only a clear promise that the French Empire would remain French, but also the military means to make its authority effective'¹¹⁹. The French Navy was able to join the fight for neutrality by preventing their ships from joining the Allied cause and threatening action against British and American possessions if an attempt was made to seize their vessels¹²⁰. The subsequent rearmament of all French forces was viewed by many Frenchmen as a positive sign that Vichy would defend the troubled French Empire and may re-enter the war against the Axis. On the other hand, it could lead to further collaboration between Vichy and the Germans.

The Free French movement's activities also affected the politics of Vichy. It has been stated that Gaullist blunders such as Dakar and Mers-el-Kébir in 1940 aided the anti-Gaullist Admiral Darlan to become Vice-Premier. The propaganda and activities that the Gaullists were actively engaged in put off many men who could well have been strong allies. If de Gaulle had been more restrained, Weygand might have taken him a lot more seriously. Weygand was not averse to the idea of France rising again to fight off the Germans and re-join the Allies¹²¹. De Gaulle sent letters to Vichy dignitaries including Weygand asking for their support or even their leadership. This may have done serious damage to de Gaulle's quest for legitimacy and to his reputation. De Gaulle falsely believed for two months from December 1940 that the Vichy government might have rescued itself from out-and-out collaboration. The reprieve that de Gaulle gave to Vichy at this time could only benefit the Pétain régime and possibly divide the support of his own movement.

¹¹⁹ R.T. Thomas, *Britain and Vichy: The Dilemma of Anglo-French Relations 1940-1942* (London and Basingstoke, 1979), p.33.

¹²⁰ Refer to Martin Thomas, 'After Mers-el-Kébir: the Armed Neutrality of the Vichy French Navy, 1940-43' in *The English Historical Review* Vol.112, No.447 (Essex, November 1997), pp. 644-649, 652-666, 668-670.

¹²¹ Weygand, *Mémoires*, p.462.

The Vichy government caused severe problems for de Gaulle and the Free French. They used propaganda methods to make de Gaulle look like a traitor and make themselves look better in the process. The Vichy government may have shown themselves up by working so deviously against de Gaulle but the more people that heard bad rumours about de Gaulle, the more they were likely to be inclined to accept them. De Gaulle knew that his struggle to win public support in the free zone and to alienate the Vichy régime would be terribly difficult. His direct adversary, Vichy, had been accepted by the majority of the southern French population in the summer of 1940. Pétain would remain popular at least until the total occupation of France. The problem that Pétain was soon to regret was that his government was weak, directionless and that it was rotten to the core; his most eminent ministers were usually happy to collaborate fully with the Nazis. Pétain could only remain popular for so long until his government would drag him down as captain of a sinking ship. De Gaulle could not rival Pétain as of November 1942 but was preparing himself for his possible succession to the throne.

To conclude, Vichy was the lynchpin upon which much of de Gaulle's support in unoccupied France depended. Their popularity and unpopularity equally affected the Gaullist movement. By the summer of 1942, de Gaulle amassed a great deal of support from people either disgusted or unhappy with collaboration. The Vichy régime was generally unpopular and de Gaulle was able to say on the radio what many Frenchmen only thought. People were apprehensive about resisting the Germans but they were also looking forward to the day when the Germans would leave. In the free zone, the Vichy government was seen as a temporary buffer between the French people and the Germans. Once the Allies had defeated the Axis powers, there was no doubt in many people's minds that a replacement for Vichy would need to be found and de Gaulle was beginning to prove to be a worthy successor.

De Gaulle's total rejection of Vichy and its policies and the consequences that his anti-Vichy activities entailed only existed because Vichy existed. 'Without Vichy colonies to win over, without Vichy soldiers and sailors to enlist, without a Vichy armistice to condemn, without Vichy statesmen to castigate, without Vichy laws to protest against, of what use would the Gaullist movement have been?'¹²² De Gaulle would make some mistakes after violently attacking Vichy on the radio which at first engendered bitterness

¹²² Hytier, Two Years of French Foreign Policy, p.82.

among the French population, but would also turn Vichy policy to his own advantage. However, he had little influence over the public opinion of Pétain and his government until 1942 and would suffer from their popularity and benefit in turn from their falls from grace. By the summer of 1942, the Vichy régime was in decline, had rejected de Gaulle and was collaborating actively with the Nazis; the Free French movement had the means to capitalise on this. The fortunes of the Vichy government had an enormous impact on the support for Gaullism in unoccupied France.

The British and other external influences on Gaullist support in France

There were many advertent and inadvertent ways in which external influences affected support for the Gaullists in unoccupied France. The British, American and Russians each had their own agenda regarding foreign policy and were all selfish in their dealings with others to guarantee their own national security. They also had their own views on de Gaulle which they exhibited freely. In this chapter, a study will be made of the external influences affecting Gaullist support including the British ventures in France, Churchill's influence over the Free French, the relationship between de Gaulle and the British, the relationship between de Gaulle and the Americans and Russians, and the effect of these influences on the people of unoccupied France. The significance of all these factors will be assessed.

There are various opinions and theories on how the Gaullists could have dealt with their external influences and vice versa. Vice-Admiral Muselier believed that full co-operation with the Allies would have made de Gaulle more popular in unoccupied France and throughout the world. De Gaulle believed in limited co-operation with the Allies because he thought that his independence was essential if he was to gain support in France. William Langer thought that de Gaulle was not co-operative enough to be of any use to the Allies and was not popular enough in metropolitan France¹²³. These theories would be put to the test in the first two years of the war.

The relationship between the United States and de Gaulle was very important to the French people. Although it seems de Gaulle did not court the support of the Americans, he was well aware of the effect that American recognition would have on his Free French movement. Pierre Cot explains that the Americans' 'popularity in France cannot be overestimated....The captive and suffering French people trust them. The French nation, as a whole, has complete confidence in the official declaration of the government of the United States. For them America...is the land of refuge and liberty; it is the vanguard of democracy'¹²⁴.

¹²³ Refer to Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, p.226 and William L. Langer, *Our Vichy Gamble* (1947). For de Gaulle's views, refer to Churchill, *Second World War Vol.II*, p.451.

¹²⁴ Pierre Cot, *Triumph of Treason* (Chicago and New York, 1944), p.391.

From the defeat of France in the summer of 1940, the Americans had recognised Pétain's Vichy Government as the legitimate authority in France. They maintained diplomatic relations with Vichy, as did Russia, Italy, Japan, Spain and Canada. In December 1940, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt displayed his trust in Vichy by appointing a high-ranking close friend, Admiral William Leahy, as Ambassador to the Marshal. Leahy proved to be an ardent Anglophobe who worked well with the Vichy government. The American attitude of scepticism towards the Free French led many high-ranking English politicians to question the legitimacy of the Gaullist movement. However, there was some speculation as to whether the Americans would transfer their support over to de Gaulle. In two articles from the *Daily Express* in 1941, this speculation was backed up by American threats. The *Express* reported that America's Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, warned Vichy that a breach of diplomatic relations would take place if Darlan allowed France to collaborate more closely with the Nazis¹²⁵. It also reported that 'the moment Pétain's Government began to grant port concessions to the Germans the American Government was expected to start sending direct aid to the Free French forces in Africa. This would greatly encourage Free French movements outside France and Free French sentiment inside France'¹²⁶. On the other hand, these threats were made in order to halt Vichy collaboration and to sustain diplomatic relations between the United States and Vichy. Free France was of much less interest to Roosevelt than Vichy which still held on to its Fleet and Empire. Both Hull and Roosevelt also viewed de Gaulle as ambitious, overweening and dangerous especially since the Dakar fiasco¹²⁷.

The Americans frowned upon the views and policies of de Gaulle and vice-versa. The General was worried about American foreign policy regarding France. In a telegram to Churchill in late 1941, de Gaulle stated, 'I have every reason to fear that the State Department's present attitude with regard to the Free French and to Vichy may do a great deal of harm to the fighting spirit in France and elsewhere. I dread the unfortunate impression on public opinion that will be produced by the United States' government's preference for those responsible for the surrender and who are guilty of collaboration'¹²⁸. The Americans found it very difficult to accept de Gaulle as a political leader rather than as a military chief. This opinion

¹²⁵ *Daily Express*, 'U.S. Final Notice to Darlan' (6 June 1941), p.1.

¹²⁶ *Daily Express*, 'If Vichy surrenders – U.S. aid for de Gaulle' (12 August 1941), p.1.

¹²⁷ Azéma, *From Munich to the Liberation*, p.89.

¹²⁸ De Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre I*, p.503.

was not without substance; up until June 1942, de Gaulle had not clearly set out his political ideology. Influential American figures in France also coloured the State Department's opinion of de Gaulle. In a private letter in 1942 from Douglas MacArthur, Secretary of the U.S. Embassy at Vichy, to Mr. Matthews at the Foreign Office, it was mentioned that 'Gaullism as a political movement is no more popular than before. As a military movement it is fine. If in case of a disembarkation your Free French friends expect to come over and run the government, there will be trouble with a capital 'T'. This feeling may change but I don't see any immediate prospect of it. I do not mean by this that the Free French could not be represented. I do mean they can't run the French side of the show'¹²⁹. The Americans found some of his policies very difficult to comprehend especially the forceful takeover of the North Atlantic island of St. Pierre-et-Miquelon in 1942. De Gaulle suspected that Vichy had installed a radio-transmitting station to guide German submarines so they took the French island without firing a single shot. However, the Americans were furious with de Gaulle's interference in their strategies. The island was close to the North American coast and de Gaulle had taken over the island without giving prior warning to the Americans. Also during this time, the Americans may have been actively working against the Gaullists. From late 1940, numerous eminent Frenchmen who distrusted de Gaulle were welcomed by Washington. In the winter of 1941-1942, some Free Frenchmen suspected that the Americans were trying to buy their friends away from them so that they could join the existing French exiles in America. In 1942, the Americans were in favour of General Giraud becoming leader of the French.

However during 1942 the Free French began to come into favour in Washington. After Pearl Harbour in December 1941, the Americans joined the Allies and were therefore comrades-in-arms with the Free French. The Americans' first step towards recognition was taken with an agreement between the United States and the Free French in July 1942. By September 1942, the American State and War Departments realised that de Gaulle was totally committed to the Allied cause, that he was now an important figure in France, and that the Free French were popular and Vichy unpopular in American public opinion. They thought that his support in France could well increase and were concerned that delaying recognition of de Gaulle might prove damaging to the United States in the future. Their opinions rubbed off on the ordinary

¹²⁹ FO 371 31941 Z5024 'Extract from Private letter from Mr. Douglas MacArthur, Secretary of the U.S. Embassy at Vichy, to Mr. Matthews'.

Frenchman's view of de Gaulle. The French people valued the opinion of the Americans very highly.

Vichy would suffer from their fall from grace in American eyes.

The relationship between Russia and de Gaulle was extremely different. From the moment that Germany made war against Russia, the Russian politicians were extremely welcoming to the Free French. However, the talks in 1941 between the two were a mixed blessing for the Free French movement. There were many disadvantages. De Gaulle knew that an alliance with Russia would lose him a great deal of sympathy and support and many of the undecided French people who had a choice between Vichy and de Gaulle recoiled away from supporting the Free French. People were frightened of the repercussions that a Soviet alliance would bring to de Gaulle and the French people. The collaborationist French newspapers and Vichy propaganda transformed the caricatures of de Gaulle from an ultra-capitalist financed by the City of London to a vassal in the service of the Russians¹³⁰. De Gaulle made an agreement with the Soviet Union in late 1941 and followed this up with a speech glorifying the Russian cause. This was seen by some anti-Gaullists as an act of obedience¹³¹. Ultimately, de Gaulle had to decide who to support between the Americans and the Russians. Up until November 1942, de Gaulle's policy to appear supportive to both was not popular with the Americans who wanted him to decide which of the two Powers he was going to back wholeheartedly.

However, the Free French benefited substantially from establishing cordial relations with the Russians. In May 1942, de Gaulle was recognised by the Soviet Union as the "symbol of France". When de Gaulle renamed his movement Fighting France in July 1942, Russia gave him its wholehearted support. It recognised 'la France Combattante' as the 'totality of French citizens and territories not recognizing the capitulation and contributing anywhere and by every means to the liberation of France'¹³². An alliance with Stalin would certainly win de Gaulle many supporters. The Russians had provided the legitimacy that de Gaulle had been waiting for; the British and Americans had recognised Fighting France in much less explicit terms. Even though Russia was feared by many French people, Stalin's recognition of the Gaullists would enhance de Gaulle's international standing and subsequently his standing within unoccupied France.

¹³⁰ Lacouture, *De Gaulle: The Rebel*, p.322.

¹³¹ Crémieux-Brilhac, *La France Libre*, p.323.

¹³² Alexander Werth, *De Gaulle: A Political Biography* (Middlesex, 1969), p.142.

In 1942, Russia was still feared less than Germany; most people in Britain thought of them as Allies first and Communists second. They were not feared as much as they were during the Cold War and therefore an alliance with the Soviet Union was not viewed as political suicide in the West.

Support for Gaullism was also influenced by the actions of the British. The Gaullist movement was associated with Britain and was affected by matters of which they had no control over such as the Dunkirk evacuation. This incident occurred one month before de Gaulle's first 'appel' in June 1940. The British were criticised for supporting the vast French Army with a small expeditionary force, for not being well-equipped, for being too much in a hurry to leave, for not providing all air support available, for saving British soldiers in preference to French soldiers, and for treacherously leaving the French to their doom¹³³. The British were widely viewed as cowards by French public opinion and all of this rubbed off on the reputation of the Free French. They were compared to British Dunkirk evacuees; in other words, their concern was not for the French people but for themselves. They were also viewed as 'friends of the British', the same British people who had left France to fight alone against the Germans.

One of the early problems that the Free French Movement experienced was their unsuccessful attempt to recruit Frenchmen to the Gaullist cause. This has already been discussed above in the Mers-el-Kébir chapter but there were more hindrances to de Gaulle's recruitment campaign including the British who seemed determined to see the evacuated French soldiers and sailors return to France. Thousands of Frenchmen were kept in internment camps in the most unsanitary conditions. Many of these men had left their jobs, their families and their homeland to come to Britain only to be forgotten about in a 'prison' camp supervised by English soldiers who had recently made a 'cowardly' escape from Dunkirk and who were 'murdering' French sailors in the Mediterranean Sea. Some Frenchmen chose to return to France on the ship the 'Meknes' but were sunk by the Germans in spite of plenty of warnings from the British. The Germans proclaimed that the British sunk the ship and the Frenchmen believed it.

The British and Free French clashed over direction in the camps. The problem lay in the Free French jealousy of British resistance against the Nazis and the British feeling of superiority over the French expecting them to nearly bow in deference. The Free French desperately wanted the British to thwart the

¹³³ FO 898/210 'Principal Points of Vichy Officers POW from Madagascar' by E.L. Wharton (Madagascar, August 1942).

common enemy but also felt a deep sense of shame for the actions of their own nation and it gave them an over-reactive inferiority complex when questions of sovereignty arose. The British actively discouraged Free French recruitment because it might make Pétain and Weygand more anti-British and their view counted at that time. The United States had not warmed to the Free French and the British did not want to be seen recruiting for them¹³⁴. Once the internees were set free, many were as anti-British and collaborationist as Vichy's finest. Their stories of ill-treatment like those of Georges Blond became excellent propaganda material¹³⁵.

When the British forces, in collaboration with the Gaullists, began to venture into the French Empire and assert their influence over it, they became very unpopular with many people in the unoccupied zone. The French public had been told by Pétain that they must cherish the French Navy and the French Empire, the only assets that the Nazis let Vichy France hold on to. When the British 'threatened' the glorious French Empire, they came to be seen by many French people as the real enemy. One view which was quite widely accepted was that 'De Gaulle est surtout coupable de permettre aux Anglais de s'emparer de territoires de l'Empire que, on est convaincu à Vichy, ils ne rendront jamais'¹³⁶. Another view blamed de Gaulle for the sole actions of the British. It was as if he was the instigator behind all the British ventures abroad involving French interests. The most accepted view was that the British were trying to gain control over the French Empire and this in turn damaged de Gaulle's reputation simply by his association with the British or more clearly by his collaboration with the British. Of course, the French public did not universally accept all of the above views. There were some people who believed that British intervention in French imperial interests was a good thing.

These contrasting views are best illustrated in the case of the British conflict in Syria in 1941. Weygand, amongst others, was disgusted that de Gaulle would stoop so low as to fight other Frenchmen after both de Gaulle and Churchill promised that an incident like that would never happen¹³⁷. Henri Dentz, the High Commissioner in Syria, shared his opinion¹³⁸. Public opinion was mostly in agreement according

¹³⁴ Maguire, *Anglo-American Policy towards the Free French*, p.17.

¹³⁵ Georges Blond, 'L'Angleterre en Guerre' (1941) referred to in Hytier, *Two Years of French Foreign Policy*, p.58.

¹³⁶ Michel, *Vichy: Année 40*, p.219. Also refer to evidence of British interventions in *Daily Mirror* (31 August 1940), p.5.

¹³⁷ Weygand, *Mémoires*, p.468.

¹³⁸ Henri Dentz's views quoted in Hytier, *Two Years of French Foreign Policy*, pp.278-9.

to Foreign Office sources¹³⁹. The way that the British treated the Free French after Dentz agreed to an armistice in July 1941 made them look like they were solely taking over effective control in Syria. It also made de Gaulle look like a fool for trusting the British and for following their selfish cause. Vice-Admiral Muselier believed that, 'les difficultés graves survenues avec le gouvernement britannique à propos de l'affaire de Syrie, le menace faite par de Gaulle de rompre l'alliance avec le Grande Bretagne, son interview maladroit et injuste [American press], l'acceptation inadmissible des conditions navales de l'armistice de Syrie, les méthodes de pouvoir personnel employées vis-à-vis de nos alliés mettaient en danger l'alliance anglaise et les intérêts suprêmes de la France'¹⁴⁰. He wanted to see further collaboration between the British and de Gaulle because he believed that the Gaullists would be ineffectual without British support. This fragile collaboration was always on the brink of disbanding¹⁴¹. The Free French defence at Bir-Hakeim in May and June 1942 changed many people's opinions in unoccupied France. The Free French were actively fighting against the Germans for the cause of the liberation of France. It was widely known, via the BBC, of the exploits of the Free French. The RAF distributed two million leaflets about the 'victory' over France and even Radio Paris mentioned it¹⁴². De Gaulle was able to redeem himself with British support.

The British became influential in French résistance circles. They formed their own French underground under the title Special Operations Executive. There was a great rivalry between the SOE and the BCRA, Free French Intelligence. Both tried to recruit the same newly arrived French people in London. The SOE let many Frenchmen believe that they were working for Free France but were really working for the British. They also tried to lure French résistance organisations with their promise of supplies and money, something that the Free French lacked the means to do. SOE's parachute drops of arms and funds began in June 1941. The Gaullists started their drops in January 1942. The RAF dropped propaganda leaflets from the Free French over French mainland and this greatly benefited de Gaulle's movement. However, they also dropped British leaflets to further their own resistance activities¹⁴³. Questions have been asked about

¹³⁹ FO 371 28273 Z5507 Mr. Robertson (British Embassy, Lisbon) to Mr. Makins (F.O.) 24/06/41 'Conditions in France'. Reports a talk with M. Pancifieu (formerly First Secretary of the French Legation in Lisbon; was in Vichy for several months).

¹⁴⁰ Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, p.226.

¹⁴¹ PREM 3/120/1 'Position of de Gaulle vis-à-vis His Majesty's Government: Memorandum of Agreement (7 August 1940) II (6)' by Sir Desmond Morton to Churchill.

¹⁴² Crémieux-Brilhac, *La France Libre*, p.367.

¹⁴³ *Daily Mirror* (16 July 1940), p.4.

the British resistance actions in the past, such as was their policy a purely military policy to maintain control of their forces including the Gaullists, a political policy to remove support for de Gaulle, or was it just a dislike and distrust of the Free French movement? No one has drawn any reasonable conclusions to these questions¹⁴⁴. However, the British Secret Service had a great deal more contacts and was more active in France than the Free French organisation. This rivalry between the external résistance caused confusion and apprehension among possible resisters and the Vichy French public. It also worried possible Gaullist supporters who questioned Britain's commitment to Free France. The British were effectively undermining de Gaulle's authority.

A great proportion of French people opposed the RAF and Allied bombing of French industrial areas and towns. They felt as if they were being blamed for the actions of the Germans. In a Prefect's report, one person's opinion was that 'jamais, les Allemands n'ont commis de telles atrocités'¹⁴⁵. However, it has been stated that 'la grande majorité des Français approuvait les bombardements de la RAF'¹⁴⁶ and this was because it was a state of war and it was necessary to try and destroy German military strength¹⁴⁷. People became very anti-British when they were bombed by the RAF but would soon excuse the British actions and support the liberation of France. The bombing raids undoubtedly affected support for Gaullism in the free zone but to a lesser degree than in the occupied zone which bore the brunt of allied raids. De Gaulle may not have lost much support if we are to believe the prefects' reports; he could also not be blamed directly for the raids.

The relationship between de Gaulle and the British was not an easy one; it was certainly not helped by de Gaulle's intransigence. As defender of French sovereignty and French equality with other major powers, de Gaulle became unpopular with the British and exacerbated the Cabinet. De Gaulle did not accept the view that 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. As Georges Bidault puts it, 'when the English discovered how

¹⁴⁴ Refer to Blake Ehrlich, The French Resistance, 1940-45 (London, 1966), pp.50-1. Crawley, De Gaulle, pp.186-7 believes it to be a purely military policy decision.

¹⁴⁵ AD HG 1896-159, rapport du commissaire spécial au préfet régional, 7 mars 1942 quoted in Laborie, L'Opinion Française, pp.264-265.

¹⁴⁶ Jacques Benoist-Méchin, 'De la défaite au désastre les occasions manquées', p.389 quoted in Laborie, L'Opinion Française, pp.264-265. Also refer to FO 371 24314 C12516 His Majesty's Ambassador at Lisbon sends Minute by Naval Attaché H.D. Owen (25 November, 1940):- 'Public Opinion in France' (a).

¹⁴⁷ AD HG 3578-2 quoted in Laborie, L'Opinion Française, pp.264-265.

inflexible he was, they probably regretted all the publicity they had given him'¹⁴⁸. This caused unease between the British and the Free French and also made a break with the British more possible. The politicians in London grew to hate de Gaulle on occasions because they believed that France's only hope for the future lay in British victory but de Gaulle seemed to be working against them at times. Churchill worked against de Gaulle at times and thought seriously about withdrawing British support from the Free French¹⁴⁹. There are disagreements as to the effect of losing British support. Georges Bidault seems to contradict himself by saying if the English had been tempted to get rid of de Gaulle, 'it would not have hurt de Gaulle's position at all; on the contrary. But without the English radio, de Gaulle would never have been anything more than a minor leader'¹⁵⁰. De Gaulle was very worried about losing support. During the Sudan crisis, he wrote to Churchill that 'si,...notre action commune en Syrie et au Liban semblait avoir pour résultat d'y diminuer la position de la France et d'y introduire des tendances et une action proprement britannique, je suis convaincu que l'effet sur l'opinion de mon pays serait désastreux'¹⁵¹.

Within the terms of the Anglo-Gaullist declaration of 23 June 1940 and the agreement between de Gaulle and Churchill on 7 August 1940, the French National Committee was recognised by the British Government who also supplied buildings, money and equipment for the Free French. The British aided de Gaulle in his empire-building in return for military assistance and they also believed that he would be listened to by the French people; without a genuine French presence, the British Government would be constantly suspected of spouting propaganda and would not fare well on their own. Britain's long-term policy in Europe was to restore France as a Great Power. De Gaulle was therefore an important figure in post-war planning and the Foreign Office appreciated this. In fact, the Foreign Office became a strong supporter of the Free French movement. General Spears believed that 'our only hope of keeping the French nation from coming in against us was to have a force, however small, fighting with us'¹⁵². As Winston Churchill puts it, 'we did our utmost to increase his [de Gaulle's] influence, authority and

¹⁴⁸ Bidault, *Resistance*, p.21.

¹⁴⁹ PREM 3/120/10A, FR (42) 37 War Cabinet, Committee on French Resistance, 11 September 1942 and PREM 3/120/6 1942

'Relations with de Gaulle'.

¹⁵⁰ Bidault, *Resistance*, p.21.

¹⁵¹ Télégramme du général de Gaulle à M. W. Churchill à Londres (le Caire, 28 juin 1941) quoted in De Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre* I, pp.432.

¹⁵² Mary Borden (Lady Spears), 'Journey down a Blind Alley' (New York and London, 1946), p.151 quoted in Hytier, *Two Years of French Foreign Policy*, p.80.

power....Whatever Vichy might do for good or ill, we would not abandon de Gaulle or discourage accessions to his growing colonial domain'¹⁵³.

This support for de Gaulle and the Free French was somewhat offset by the British Government's willingness to seek an understanding with the Vichy Government. Some British representatives such as M. Parr believed that the Free French would suffer: 'Chaque marque de courtoisie et de tolérance, chaque concession et facilité accordée aux gens de Vichy, affaiblissent les Français Libres, sèment la perplexité et le découragement dans l'opinion en France et dans l'Empire et contribuent à affermir l'ennemi. La France Libre s'éteindrait si le peuple français devait en arriver à la conclusion que nous respectons Vichy et que nous sommes prêts à l'aider au détriment des Français combattants. Le peuple, dans ce cas, se résignerait à la victoire allemande'¹⁵⁴. The British Government wanted to reach an agreement with Vichy in order to keep the French Fleet, bases and colonial produce out of Germany's grasp but would have to disown de Gaulle and his organisation. The British considered and eventually dismissed rumours and supposed Vichy intentions to come to an agreement about France re-entering the war. These Vichy intentions included the Louis Rougier affair and the Baudouin message to Sir Samuel Hoare. Churchill later explained that 'our consistent policy was to make the Vichy Government and its members feel that, so far as we were concerned, it was never too late to mend. Whatever had happened in the past, France was our comrade in tribulation, and nothing but actual war between us should prevent her being our partner in victory'¹⁵⁵. How serious the probability of an Anglo-Vichy agreement was and is open to question but judging by some Vichy politicians' opinions, it was a far-fetched idea¹⁵⁶.

The effect that the relationship between the Allies and de Gaulle had on the people in the unoccupied zone was substantial. Firstly, their relationship contributed to the growing unpopularity of the Vichy Government. Secondly, many people in France came to distrust the Allies. After de Gaulle and André Labarthe called for French engineers and technicians to join them in London in the summer of 1940, some people were uncertain whether to go because they were worried in case the British would lose the war. The

¹⁵³ Churchill, *Second World War Vol. II*, pp.450-1, 454. Also refer to Télégramme de M. W. Churchill au général de Gaulle au Caire (Londres, 4 avril 1941) quoted in De Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre I*, p.385.

¹⁵⁴ Télégramme de M. Parr, Consul général britannique à Brazzaville, adressé au Foreign Office et communiqué au général de Gaulle (Traduction) (Brazzaville, 13 mai 1941) quoted in De Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre I*, pp.402-3.

¹⁵⁵ Churchill, *Second World War Vol. II*, p.450.

¹⁵⁶ 'Ordre du jour adresse par l'amiral Darlan aux Forces Maritimes Françaises (24 September 1940) quoted in Coutau-Bégarie and Huan (eds.), *Lettres et notes de l'Amiral Darlan*, p.235.

British had planned that if they defeated the Germans, the Free French would be triumphant. No one had explained what would happen to the Free French if the British lost. This caused unease with possible Gaullists and support was thin on the ground for the first few months. Communist Pierre Varillon wrote before June 1941 that Gaullism would be 'swept away and it will be useful to us if we give the country freedom, peace and bread...before Britain arrives to do so'¹⁵⁷. A section of French were distrustful of the British regarding the Jews: - 'All Frenchmen welcome the measures against the Jews and their only fear of a British victory is that Britain will insist on the restoration of Jewish privileges'¹⁵⁸. Sir Samuel Hoare reported that the people in unoccupied France believed that neither side could win and a compromise peace for one or two years would be favorable; they therefore did not believe that de Gaulle would be victorious¹⁵⁹.

Other people in unoccupied France were or became anti-British and anti-Allies; they hated the Allies rather than distrusting them. In June 1940, Churchill's broadcast to the French people to aid the British Government in achieving victory was unpopular with a lot of French people who believed that the British had not assisted the French in their time of need and were trying to divide the French by promoting de Gaulle at a time when the French people sought solace in the arms of Pétain. Many young people could not support Britain because they thought Britain was fighting for the survival of capitalism¹⁶⁰. Letters from unoccupied France expressed anti-British sentiment. According to the Foreign Office compiler, the strongest factor in French opinion in April 1941 was 'a feeling that the war is now none of France's business, and that other Frenchmen should concentrate on National Recovery and leave England and Germany to exhaust each other, so that when the war is over a regenerated France will be able to take the lead in Europe'¹⁶¹.

However, from the evidence that has been gathered, it would seem that the majority of French people slowly began to follow and support the Allies. According to Pierre Laborie, the reason people started to

¹⁵⁷ Pierre Varillon, 'Résistant de la première heure' (Paris, 1983), pp.182-4 quoted in Lacouture, *De Gaulle: The Rebel*, p.373.

¹⁵⁸ FO 371 24314 C12156 His Majesty's Ambassador at Lisbon (25 November 1940) sends Minute by Naval Attaché H.D. Owen: 'Public opinion in France' - views by Captain Colbert.

¹⁵⁹ FO 371 28268 1941 France File No.45 Z807 Sir Samuel Hoare (Madrid) 'Report on conditions in France', given by French Minister to Portugal (02/02/41).

¹⁶⁰ Halls, *The Youth of Vichy France*, p.396.

¹⁶¹ FO 371 28272 Z4320 Imperial Censorship, Trinidad (12/04/41) 'Report on public opinion in France'. Refer to specific letters:- R. (Cluny, France) to R. (Chicago, USA) 18/03/41, MJP (St. Martin d'Artenset, France) to J.C. (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) 18/03/41 and R.R. (Marseille, France) to R.V. (Basseterre, Guadeloupe) 09/03/41.

support the Allies was less to do with the fact that they wanted them to be victorious than by their attitude to the Germans. Their hatred of the Germans was so aggressive that it made them support Britain and its allies¹⁶². Albert Vulliez, a captain in the French Navy, backs this up by stating that young sailors replaced the old Anglophobes in the Navy. 'Les jeunes...semblaient n'avoir qu'un désir: partir un jour vers l'Angleterre'¹⁶³. According to Foreign Office reports in 1940 there was a general pro-British feeling in unoccupied France. In fact, one report mentions that '80% are now definitely pro-British'¹⁶⁴. As early as August 1940, German police and Clermont-Ferrand police reported that the French population 'preferred to listen to British radio'¹⁶⁵. By 1941, reports are even more positive about French opinion in the free zone towards the British¹⁶⁶. The entry of America into the war and the North African landings swayed people's opinions over to the Allied camp. By 1942, the Allies were becoming more popular. Vichy propaganda posters in unoccupied France were defaced with 'V' signs for 'Victory' and some actually defaced Pétain's image. An example of this is on page fifty-four. Other graffiti included 'V.V.RAF' (Victory to the RAF)¹⁶⁷. Even de Gaulle admitted that the British were very popular in France¹⁶⁸.

The side-effect of British and Allies' popularity was the increased support for de Gaulle. He was intrinsically linked with the fortunes of the Allies and when they were mentioned, he was also invariably mentioned in the same sentence. However, de Gaulle could not satisfy every Frenchman's requirements. In 1942, some of the pro-British Frenchmen such as Muselier did not like the idea that de Gaulle was trying to become independent of the British. The anti-British Frenchmen did not like the idea that de Gaulle was allied to the British. It would seem that he could not win. By 1942, de Gaulle was trying to appear as an independent leader at the same time that the French were increasing their support for the Allies. Support for de Gaulle had been affected greatly by anti-Allied propaganda in 1940 but his independence meant that

¹⁶² Laborie, *L'Opinion Française*, p.240.

¹⁶³ Vulliez, *Mers-el-Kébir*, p.318.

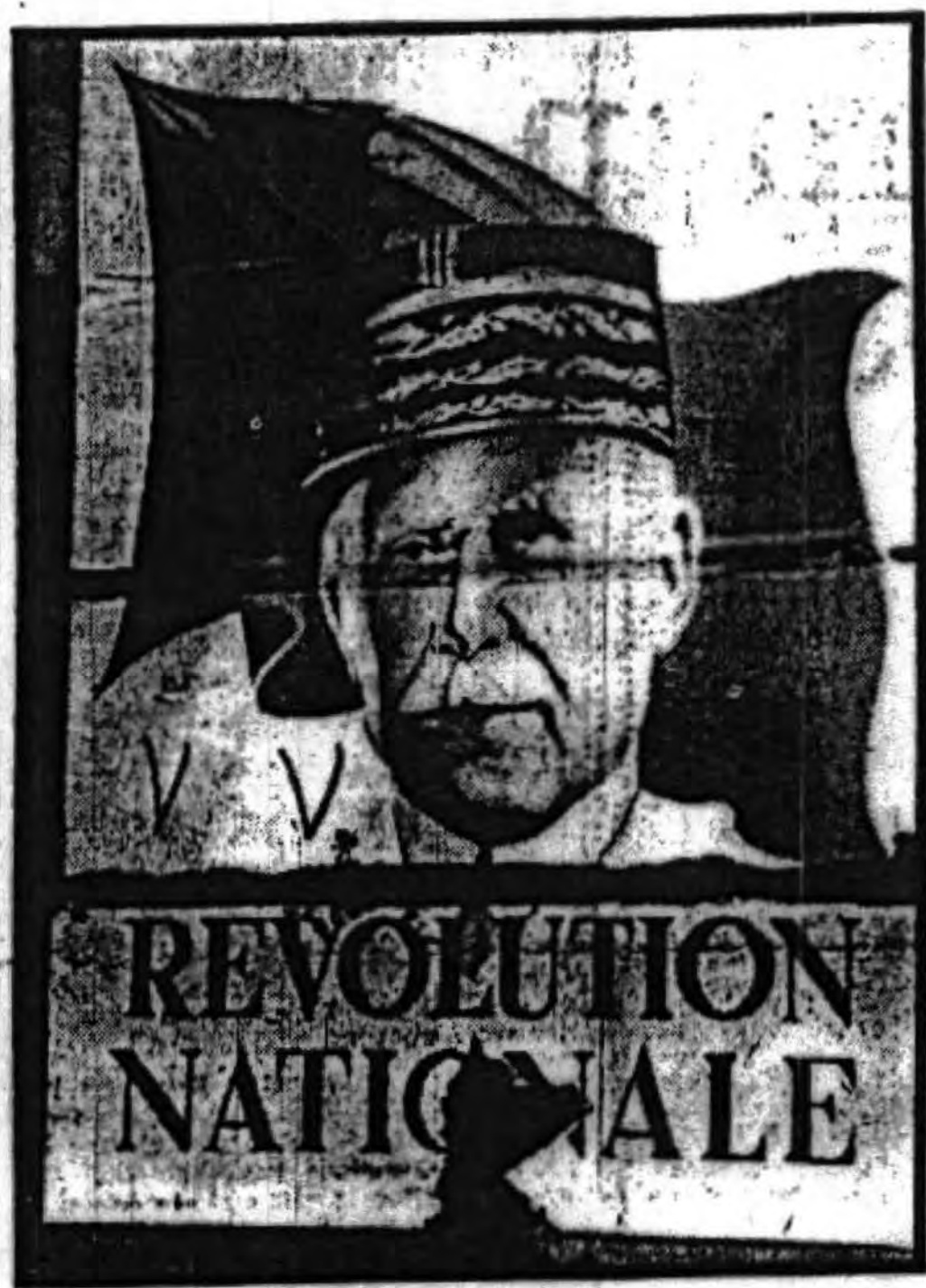
¹⁶⁴ FO 371 24314 C12570 British Consulate General (Barcelona), Francis Patron, relaying Messrs. Lloyd and Graham's opinion of unoccupied France (18 November 1940). Also refer to C12573 and C12516 (a) and (d).

¹⁶⁵ Quote from Militärverwaltung bezirk B, 11-19/08/1940. In File RW35/1254 V.1070, Militärarchiv, Freiburg. Also refer to Commissaire de Police du 3e Arrondissement à Monsieur le Préfet du PdD, Rapport moral mensuel d'ordre général, No.3765 (25/11/40) and Préfet à Monsieur le Ministre de l'Intérieur (11/11/40) – both in M03822. All quoted from Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France*, p.144.

¹⁶⁶ For example FO 371 28270 Z2630 'Situation in unoccupied France' W. Kelly (Berne) to Foreign Office (05/04/41). FO 371 28272 Z4320 Imperial Censorship, Trinidad (12/04/41) 'Report on public opinion in France' B. (Gers, France) to E.B. (Michigan, USA) 10/03/41. Pro-British feeling in FO 371 28270 Z2460 (letters from unoccupied France).

¹⁶⁷ *Daily Express* (20 June 1941) 'What they see as they walk in Marseilles', p.1.

¹⁶⁸ FO 371 31941 Z5649 Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (Eden) to the War Cabinet (3 July, 1942) 'De Gaulle's views on France at a dinner given by Charles Peake'.



Poster taken from Daily Express (20 June 1941) 'What they see as they walk in
Marseilles', p.1.

much of the glory later bestowed on the Allies was not directed at him. On the other hand, his very independence may have been his strongest asset until the liberation. It is very difficult to determine what the relationship between de Gaulle and Churchill consisted of and it is even more difficult to estimate what influence the relationship between the Free French and the Allies had on public opinion in France. Russian and American support was invaluable to de Gaulle's cause but the lukewarm attitude of the Americans in particular was most definitely an unfortunate state of affairs¹⁶⁹. Also, it took de Gaulle until 1942 to understand the importance of American support. One can conclude that the Free French would not have survived without Allied support and facilities, but de Gaulle would also not have survived if he had been constantly viewed as a puppet of the Allies. This matches de Gaulle's theory. De Gaulle was eventually successful in using the British to join the Allies and to establish himself as independent leader of the French Résistance by November 1942.

¹⁶⁹ An example of this is the opinion of William L. Langer, Our Vichy Gamble (1947).

The Influence of the Résistance including the Communists on support for Gaullism

This chapter will discuss the ways in which the metropolitan French Résistance influenced and affected support for the Free French movement in unoccupied France. Areas of interest include the beginning of résistance in the free zone, the early clash between de Gaulle and the Résistance, the Communist Résistance movement, Jean Moulin and his search for unity, the organisation of the Résistance between 1940 and 1942 and the later relationship between de Gaulle and the resisters.

After the defeat of France in 1940, small résistance movements sprang up all over France to continue the fight against the Nazis. The number of résistance fighters was very small in proportion to the total French population. Aidan Crawley believes that there were only ten thousand resisters until the last year of the war¹⁷⁰ while Jean-Pierre Azéma expresses the view that even though there were two hundred and twenty thousand official resisters, there were undoubtedly many more who waged their own war against the occupiers and régime¹⁷¹. Adding one hundred thousand dead résistance fighters to the official list, Robert O. Paxton states that around two per cent of the adult French population was involved in active résistance participation¹⁷². Whatever the correct figure, it was an appreciable minority.

People in the free zone did not join the résistance groups in the latter half of 1940 for many reasons. Many possible resisters could not believe the war was over and were stunned into submission. People felt that they had no hope for the future, a prerequisite for résistance activity. It was also very unclear that whether being anti-Nazi also meant that one opposed Vichy or supported their nationalism and independence. Confusion of interpretations and a diffusion of anger amongst the French population meant that people did not all decide to become resisters. The disarray in left-wing organisations and willingness of right-wing movements to support the Vichy Government led to small, disparate bands of exceptional individuals forming the first résistance organisations and becoming 'résistants de la première heure'.

The ideologies of the Résistance movements were varied and differed in complexity. Many organisations have been described as being 'of the left'¹⁷³. The working classes and left-wing élite found

¹⁷⁰ Crawley, *De Gaulle*, pp.186-7.

¹⁷¹ Azéma, *From Munich to the Liberation*, p.103.

¹⁷² Paxton, *Vichy France*, pp.294-5.

¹⁷³ Peter Novick, *The Resistance versus Vichy: The Purge of Collaborators in Liberated France* (London, 1968), p.15.

opposition to authority more acceptable than right-wing businessmen and peasants. They also came to despise the right-wing Vichy régime for all its excesses and embarrassments. The working classes were the worst sufferers under the régime compared to some peasants and businessmen who profited from the new circumstances. On the other hand, it was not just a working-class experience as Colonel Rémy confesses when he states that ‘twice in two years [November 1940 and October 1942] two of the ‘grands bourgeois’ had been glad to help me and run mortal risks. And yet I have been complaining about that class!’¹⁷⁴. It was also not just a left-wing experience. Men such as Georges Loustaunau-Lacau who were previous members of pre-war protofascist leagues such as the Cagoule became right-wing resisters fighting against the Vichy regime.

There were some resisters who opposed de Gaulle because they thought that his right-wing views were similar to those of Vichy¹⁷⁵; the majority did not know his political tendencies and therefore were more unsure of his credentials. The Résistance movements were on the whole unsure about the direction that post-war France should take; they only assured themselves that a capitalist and decadent régime like the Third Republic and the Russian Communist model were both totally unsuitable.

However, the Free French looked upon the struggle as one of national liberation, a matter of military and international importance. To the internal resisters, it was viewed only as a revolutionary and ideological struggle. The enemy of the résistance movements was not necessarily the same. For the socialists, it was the capitalist class, the trade unionists opposed the employers’ yellow unions and states’ corporatist unions, the old-style Dreyfusard republicans were against clericalism, injustice, censorship and anti-Semitism which were all part of the National Revolution, the local resisters fought against local collaborators, demonstrators found an enemy in the police, and hungry urban families were unhappy with Vichy’s scarcity of food and the black market¹⁷⁶. The Southern and Northern zones both had very different enemies. The southern résistance movements still largely paid allegiance to Pétain and were also very sceptical about de Gaulle. They had various enemies, they were more ‘attentiste’, and they took only minor risks on the whole. The Résistance groupings in the North fought against the Nazis and were much more active. Their reaction to the German occupiers was much stronger and they paid very little allegiance to

¹⁷⁴ Colonel Rémy, *Courage and Fear* (London, 1950; trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard), pp.150-152.

¹⁷⁵ *Les Informations Sociales: Bulletin d'Information* (Juin – Juillet 1943, France) à l’usage des Militants Syndicalistes et des futurs cadres sociaux de la France libérée No.1, p.6.

¹⁷⁶ Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France*, p.230.

Pétain. They also had more contact with the Free French and British intelligence services until 1942. They took grave risks as the penalty of resisting was more severe under the Nazis. For the Free French, their main enemies were the Vichy Government followed by the Germans. All of these different oppositions did not necessarily hinder Résistance groupings which emerged because of affinities of place, ideas, past and experience.

The early résistance movements were not necessarily formed solely by outsiders; a view expressed by Emmanuel d'Astier¹⁷⁷. In many cases, people looked to leaders of a particular group or community to show them the way. However, some of the leaders of the Résistance movements tended to be already in conflict with the society into which they were born before the war. They tended to be dissatisfied Communists and army officers, revolutionary priests, trade unionists and intellectuals. These men were at war with the status quo, men such as de Gaulle and Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie¹⁷⁸. Individuals from varying backgrounds and with various aims and objectives formed small groups fighting against the acceptance of the armistice, the German occupation, and sometimes against the Vichy régime. Each group had to put out its own propaganda, organise its own activities, and so on. The first 'réseaux' began with a few groups joining together and communicating via London radio but the vast majority of résistance movements were local, individual and secret. Many rivalries between groups thwarted any attempt of joining together to form larger groups. Many of the people who joined the Résistance were certain in their own mind and determined to follow their own convictions. They were also later viewed as being patriotic for resisting the Germans. However, the real reason for people resisting the enemy was specific to themselves. These may have included connections to England and America, personal experiences of the war, anti-authoritarianism and rebellious views, anti-Fascist opinion, and general optimism. These reasons were affected by family situations, locality, group membership, jobs and communications¹⁷⁹. Later resisters were usually angered by a specific event or experience that turned them against Vichy or the Germans.

These individual viewpoints and basic organisations were not conducive to collectivity. The prevalence of inexperience and disarray within organisations would become a problem for the Free French who later wished to organise the southern Résistance movements along their lines. By supplying them with Free

¹⁷⁷ Emmanuel d'Astier referred to in Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France*, p.76.

¹⁷⁸ Jonathan H. King, "Emmanuel d'Astier and the Nature of the French Resistance" in *Journal of Contemporary History* Volume 8 No.4 (London and California, October 1973), pp.31-32.

¹⁷⁹ Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France*, pp.79-80.

French funds and immersing them in Gaullist political thought, the Free French hoped that opinions would be changed. For this to occur, structure and organisation was paramount. 'The new resistance groups', according to Bidault, 'recruited members at random and were sometimes very careless. They effectively put an end to creating an independent Home Resistance'¹⁸⁰. The class system seemed to add to the instability of the Résistance groups. Colonel Passy believed that 'la petite bourgeoisie...étaient, proportionnellement, et dans l'ensemble, plus résistants, mais malgré tout très divisés'¹⁸¹; the general feeling was that the movements as a whole were divided by class or politics and then amongst themselves. Their methods of recruitment were poor, they argued about the best way to utilise the scant resources they had acquired, their leaders had set up a power base which they were proud of and which they were unwilling to share with others for fear of usurpation or being informed upon, and they cherished their independence so much that they were unenthused by receiving orders from a higher authority, namely de Gaulle. The Résistance could never have been a homogeneous, tightly-knit group, since the very phenomenon known as the Résistance was developed between 1940 and 1942 in a plurality of ways¹⁸². Taking away their independent thought would be like taking away the Free French's 'raison d'être', something which the Free French did not consider at all.

Other problems that the Free French initially encountered included the widespread support for Pétain and his government within résistance movements. Many organisations such as Combat initially saw themselves as fighting secretly for Pétain's struggle against the Nazis. Another factor was that de Gaulle was a comparatively unknown figure in France during the first year of the Vichy régime and even thereafter. Jean-Pierre Lévy, a member of Franc-Tireur, explains that in July 1940, 'je n'ai pas connaissance de l'appel du 18 juin 1940. Ce n'est qu'un peu plus tard que j'ai appris l'existence d'un général français – dont personne d'ailleurs ne connaissait le nom'¹⁸³. Of those resisters who had heard of de Gaulle, a significant proportion were unsure about him and needed to know more about him before they could possibly support him. This was mainly due to the fact that de Gaulle had tried to rally Frenchmen in London and in the Empire but not actually from metropolitan France, and that they knew nothing of his political and personal intentions. Some resisters were pro-de Gaulle but they had no way of contacting him.

¹⁸⁰ Bidault, *Resistance*, p.21.

¹⁸¹ Colonel Passy, *Souvenirs Tome I: 2e Bureau Londres* (Monte Carlo, 1947), p.232.

¹⁸² Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France*, p.247.

¹⁸³ Jean-Pierre Lévy, *Mémoires d'un franc-tireur: Itinéraire d'un résistant (1940-1944)* (Brussels, 1998), p.36.

Georges Bidault states that he was attracted to de Gaulle's cause from the outset but had no way of getting in touch with the Free French to co-ordinate his actions with them¹⁸⁴.

Up until at least the beginning of 1942, de Gaulle and the Free French frequently clashed with the metropolitan Résistance movements. Some résistance movements in France did not think that the Free French were true resisters because they had left French soil. According to Henri Frenay, there were quite a few resisters in the free zone who believed that Pétain was the real resister. Some of his intelligence friends thought de Gaulle 'was a mere criminal, an overambitious general in the pay of the "foreigners" and the "Judeo-Masons"',¹⁸⁵. De Gaulle was lambasted for being an émigré and Pétain was supported for his steadfastness in the face of defeat. All of these factors were influenced by Vichy propaganda and by resisters' commitments to avoid civil conflict and revolution.

De Gaulle's assumption of leadership was not very popular with the majority of resisters; nor was his domineering and dictatorial attitude. Jean Boutron, a supporter of de Gaulle, admits that 'la tendance gaulliste, évidemment, est de rattacher à de Gaulle toutes les activités résistantes des Français'¹⁸⁶. The Free French had already begun to perpetuate the latter day Gaullist resistancialist myth: - 'the Resistance equals de Gaulle; de Gaulle equals France; hence the Resistance equals France'¹⁸⁷. An excellent example of this is the radio speech that de Gaulle gave on 23 October 1941 to the French Résistance organisations. The issue of premature violence was always a matter of disagreement among the resisters dividing even the active resistance, but when de Gaulle deplored the assassinations of Germans for the waste of life of subsequent resisters and for the waste of time, he was supported by many but also condemned by many others. In the southern zone, he was disliked for his domineering attitude but was supported in what he said¹⁸⁸. Most people in the South believed in preparing for the future liberation of the country and for ousting the occupiers. De Gaulle's authority was very limited at this time and his speech was not followed as such¹⁸⁹; the people who supported what he said were the people who were already resisting by non-violent means.

De Gaulle was unpopular with many resisters until later in the war when they were more assured of his success. One resister later said that 'even after 1942 there was no patriotic upsurge; that's a myth' but there

¹⁸⁴ Bidault, *Resistance*, pp.13-17.

¹⁸⁵ Henri Frenay, *The Night will end* (London, 1976; trans. Dan Hofstadter), p.50.

¹⁸⁶ Boutron, *De Mers-el-Kébir à Londres*, p.340.

¹⁸⁷ Rouso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, p.90.

¹⁸⁸ Boutron, *De Mers-el-Kébir à Londres*, p.340.

¹⁸⁹ Ehrlich, *The French Resistance*, pp.51-53.

was 'independent action without orders from the top and without a hard political line'¹⁹⁰. Others were very unhappy with the conduct of the Free French in London who they thought did not take the French Résistance seriously. Substantial aid and effective liaison did not materialise out of Carlton Gardens until 1942 and this was coerced by French résistance leaders. However, according to Gerald Maguire, it was often difficult for the Free French to contact résistance groups who were usually very isolated and the Free French Intelligence service was completely dependent on the British for resources such as transmitting messages, distributing weapons and so on which was resented by the Résistance¹⁹¹. On the other hand, Alexander Werth states that Free French intelligence failed in its attempt to develop large-scale résistance until the summer of 1942¹⁹². However successful or unsuccessful the BCRA was in fulfilling its remit, it could not inspire wholehearted support for the Free French. De Gaulle mistrusted the interior résistance because he did not understand metropolitan French opinions, spending little time there; he found the résistance foreign to him and he despaired of the success of the relationship between the French and the British Intelligence services. After meeting de Gaulle several times in March 1942, Christian Pineau, a leading syndicalist, wrote that, 'he [de Gaulle] mentioned the Free French, the troops in Africa, as if they were the sole representatives of the French Résistance....He put me not a single question about the Résistance, not a single question about my own activities'¹⁹³. Links remained weak for these reasons.

In 1940, Gaullism could have been recognised more as a state of mind than as an organised movement; the most popular method of support for Gaullism was simply tuning into the BBC radio service and not demonstrating in the street, organising réseaux and so on. The largest movements in the southern zone, Combat, Libération and Liberté made only passing references to de Gaulle until 1942. During 1942, the southern résistance movements became more supportive of the Gaullists but there were ulterior motives behind their actions. Some résistance leaders, according to Henri Frenay, regarded de Gaulle as a useful 'symbol' to use and discard as and when required; the leaders would retain complete liberty of judgment¹⁹⁴. It was some movements' intentions to receive funds and equipment from the Free French but at the same time try to transform the Résistance into a strong non-Gaullist political force upon which to depend. This

¹⁹⁰ Mlle. Madeleine Baudoin (6 September 1971, Marseilles) interview quoted in Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France*, pp.277-278.

¹⁹¹ Maguire, *Anglo-American Policy towards the Free French*, p.97.

¹⁹² Werth, *De Gaulle: A Political Biography*, p.141.

¹⁹³ Christian Pineau quoted in Frenay, *The Night will end*, pp.127-128.

¹⁹⁴ Letter from Henri Frenay to Jean Moulin (8 April 1943) quoted in Frenay, *The Night will end*, p.89.

unrealistic conclusion created a great deal of dissension. By November 1942, some resisters had accepted de Gaulle as an important leader of the Résistance but many believed that he should resign when liberation had been achieved. One fear which the resisters in France experienced was explained by Colonel Rémy to Colonel Passy: - 'Ce que les vrais patriotes craignent le plus, c'est que la large pléaide des dénonciations ne soit, le jour venu, au tout premier rang pour crier "Vive de Gaulle!" plus fort que les autres et ne livre ses compatriotes, en sens inverse, afin de se protéger contre de justes représailles'¹⁹⁵. Another fear that the resisters harboured was the belief that de Gaulle was in favour of resurrecting the Third Republic. De Gaulle did not spell out his political ideas to the Résistance and by including old party members in the National Résistance Council, he made himself unpopular with them.

The Communists were possibly viewed by the Free French as their greatest threat in résistance circles to the success of their movement in unoccupied France. The greatest problem with the Communists was that they were so unpredictable. At one point in time, the Free French would be despised but a policy change would reverse opinions and Communists would embrace the Free French with open arms. However, this unpredictability would benefit the Gaullists. For instance, police in Clermont-Ferrand considered the Communists as the main antagonists and the Gaullists as mere misguided patriots until an anti-Gaullist order was issued by René Bousquet in August 1942¹⁹⁶. The Communists were also similar to other resisters in that each movement or group have been loosely grouped under the banner of 'Communists' whereas in reality their opinions and political ideas were very different from each other. This is best illustrated by the divergence of opinion during the first two years of the war when the official line was one of neutrality. As H.R. Kedward puts it, after the armistice 'the Communists in the southern zone were anti-Vichy, both for its internal and external policies, anti-collaboration with Germany, anti-Pétain, suspicious of de Gaulle and Britain, opposed to any further involvement in the imperialist war on any side, vigorous in their defence of French republican values, and as vehemently anti-capitalist as at any other time in their history'¹⁹⁷. The official line was followed by the majority, but there were large-scale defections from the party after their incomprehension of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939. Some of the defectors supported de Gaulle but most

¹⁹⁵ Colonel Rémy quoted in Passy, Souvenirs Tome II, p.52.

¹⁹⁶ René Bousquet to M. le Préfet Régional, MO7159 (20 August 1942, Clermont-Ferrand) quoted in Sweets, Choices in Vichy France, p.205.

¹⁹⁷ Kedward, Resistance in Vichy France, p.55.

fought for their own anti-German cause. Men like Pierre Brossolette were a rare breed indeed¹⁹⁸. The split in the French Communist Party made the Free French look more organised and structured but the subsequent official anti-de Gaulle propaganda did not help the Gaullists gain support. In *L'Humanité* on 29 May 1941 one article read, 'Combattant les uns derrière de Gaulle, agent de la City, les autres derrière Darlan, valet de Berlin, des soldats Français sont conduites à la boucherie pour une cause qui n'est pas la leur'¹⁹⁹. In late June 1941, the Communist Party completely revised its policy following the outbreak of war between Russia and Germany. They officially supported the Russian, Free French and British causes as well as officially opposing Vichy and the Nazis. This influenced a large number of rank-and-file Communists to support the Free French. De Gaulle welcomed their support because they would provide extra support for his own movement and because they had been and still were worthy opponents. The Communists and Socialists now supported de Gaulle because his symbol was valued by the rank-and-file; because he received a commendation from Léon Blum; and was willing to work with Socialists by for instance including André Philip in the Free French Committee; and because to oppose de Gaulle would split the party and cause further internal strife. The Socialist *résistance* newspaper 'Libérer et Fédérer' stated on 14 July 1942, 'Nous nous rangeons aux côtés de la France Libre et de son chef le général de Gaulle qui est symbole vivant de la résistance française à l'envahisseur....Aux soldats de la France Libre comme à son chef, nous adressons ici notre hommage et notre salut fraternel'²⁰⁰.

However, their support was late in coming and when it came, there were conditions attached. The Socialist newspaper 'L'Insurgé' explained that 'nous voulons conserver notre indépendance politique envers le Comité de Gaulle,...et encore plus envers Giraud'²⁰¹. According to Marc Boegner, M. André Philip said that de Gaulle would have to do what he was told²⁰². This independent streak mirrored de Gaulle's attitude; he would not compromise his authority by allowing the Communists to dictate to him and he viewed their co-operation as the perfect opportunity for him to control them. His two great advantages were that the French Communist Party had delayed entering the *résistance* and that he was a shrewd and

¹⁹⁸ Views and story of Pierre Brossolette, Socialist and pro-Gaullist from 1940, are quoted in *Manchester Guardian* 'De Gaulle's new recruits' (18 September 1942), p.6.

¹⁹⁹ *L'Humanité* No.107 (Édition de zone sud), 'A bas la guerre imperialiste' (29 May 1941, Limoges), p.1. For another example, refer to *L'Humanité* No.102 (Édition de zone sud) (9 April 1941, Tirage du Gard), p.1.

²⁰⁰ *Libérer et Fédérer*, 'Notre Mouvement et la France Combattante' (France, 14 July 1942), p.3.

²⁰¹ *L'Insurgé: Organe Socialiste de Libération Prolétarienne* No.15 (Lyons, January 1943), p.1. Similar views in *Le Populaire: Organe du Comité d'Action Socialiste* No.16 (Lyons, 16 January / 1 February 1943), p.1.

²⁰² FO371 32027 Z6415 1942 France File No. 608 M. Kingsley Rooker to W. Strang (12 August, 1942) 'Future position of General de Gaulle: Conversation with Boegner who described views of M. André Philip'.

determined opponent who had been given more recognition from the Soviet Union than the Communist Party itself.

De Gaulle's greatest asset within southern France was Jean Moulin, his personal emissary who was sent to France at first to unite the *résistance* movements in the free zone. Some resisters did not like Moulin, especially Henri Frenay who blamed Moulin for favouring the Communist *résistance* and having ulterior motives on that score. He also believed that Moulin played *résistance* movements off against each other to increase his own standing²⁰³. Though this may be the case, there is no doubting Jean Moulin's success in France. De Gaulle sent him on a mission on 1 January 1942 to unite the southern *résistance* movements. With some modest funds and the assistance of some fellow Free French agents, he had set up a substantial 'réseaux'. It was, however, mainly due to his personality, his determination and his negotiation skills that he became so successful. By April 1942, he had set up the 'Délégation Générale du Général de Gaulle en France' which included a secret army, a propaganda office for the Free French and metropolitan *résistance*, and a committee preparing for post-war France. By the end of 1942, Moulin and a few other Free French agents including Pierre Brossolette had made it possible for the three largest southern *résistance* movements, Henri Frenay's *Combat*, Emmanuel d'Astier's *Libération*, and Jean-Pierre Lévy's *Franc-Tireur* to join together along with nascent political parties and unite under the new name of the *Mouvements Unis de la Résistance* (MUR). This new organisation also initiated links with northern *résistance* movements. De Gaulle had now attained powerful links to the interior *résistance* and his authority became real. His new trump card, that of being the man who had brought the *résistance* movements together, would be played to great effect until the end of the war and thereafter. Jean-Pierre Lévy later wrote, 'La reconnaissance de l'autorité du Général, en échange de subsides et de moyens matériels qui nous sont essentiels, pour la survie de nos mouvements, telle est en définitive l'alternative'²⁰⁴.

Overall, the Free French and de Gaulle grew in popularity with the *Résistance* in the unoccupied zone. There were a few examples of resisters still not knowing who de Gaulle really was in 1944²⁰⁵, but his authority and presence grew from the summer of 1942. In moral terms, the *Résistance* was very important and to be viewed as the leader of the French *Résistance* was a definitive step for de Gaulle towards the

²⁰³ Frenay, *The Night will end*, pp.444-448.

²⁰⁴ Lévy, *Mémoires d'un franc-tireur*, p.73.

²⁰⁵ Views of Lucie Aubrac, active *résistant* and wife of Raymond Aubrac, quoted in Werth, *De Gaulle: A Political Biography*, p.177.

acknowledgement and support of the Fighting French in French public opinion. The French *résistance* newspapers also wrote what they thought of him. 'Le Populaire' stated that 'le général de Gaulle est le symbole naturel et nécessaire de la résistance et de la libération'²⁰⁶. Colonel Passy wrote that the Free French now had the means to link up with much smaller *résistance* movements and to work together against Vichy and the Nazis²⁰⁷. By 1942, de Gaulle believed that he needed the support of the *résistance* in France to further his strategies with the British and Americans and gain more support in France. What he needed, according to Brossolette, was 'tangible and undeniable proof of the existence of Gaullism in France'; Brossolette asked André Philip to 'supply, publicly and visibly,...a demonstration of the unreserved gaullism of the socialist masses'²⁰⁸. This proof was evident by the end of 1942.

It is impossible to definitively determine how much the southern *résistance* movements influenced southern French public opinion during the first two years of the Second World War. It is impossible to understand the true nature of the *résistance* due to the lack of written evidence left behind. Furthermore, resisters' memoirs are too often politically motivated. We can only surmise that the growing trend in popularity for de Gaulle within the southern *résistance* was mirrored in public opinion. The *Résistance* was only an appreciable minority of the population but we can presume that as the war progressed, the *Résistance* movements were looked upon as being on the winning side; their influence grew and so did their numbers, and public opinion became more pro-résistant. De Gaulle was able to unite the *Résistance* under his leadership. The extra favourable propaganda that he subsequently received from the *résistance* was also of enormous benefit, and this 'coming together' also brought many different political factions under his 'control', including the Communists. Many of the *résistance* groups wanted to unite with others to further their own activities; de Gaulle provided the collective link. This link did not change many resisters' political opinions; it only made them loyal to de Gaulle and the Gaullists. The Gaullist resistancialist myth can be easily dismissed but it is very difficult to pinpoint the period when the majority of the metropolitan *Résistance* allied themselves with de Gaulle. It also depends on one's concept of the *Résistance*; whether the *Résistance* consisted only of active resisters or whether passive and armchair

²⁰⁶ Le Populaire No.2 (15 June 1942) quoted in Claude Bellanger, *Presse Clandestine 1940-1944* (Paris, 1961), pp.110-111.

²⁰⁷ Passy, *Souvenirs* Tome II, pp.132-141.

²⁰⁸ Letter from Pierre Brossolette to André Philip (30 May 1942) quoted in *ibid.*, pp.220, 225. For examples of de Gaulle's popularity with the *résistance*, refer to Frenay, *The Night will end*, pp.170-224, Rémy, *Courage and Fear*, pp.76-77 and Lévy, *Mémoires d'un franc-tireur*, pp.75-77.

resisters, or even 'attentistes', were included in its members. Even though I believe in the former, I also believe that the influence of the Résistance on public opinion increased throughout the period 1940-1942, as did the Résistance's support for de Gaulle.

Public Opinion in Unoccupied France.

Evidence gathered about Gaullist support in unoccupied France will enable us to test the hypothesis that Gaullist influence indeed grew to 1942 thanks to a variety of unanticipated factors. By studying the extent of support for Gaullism in unoccupied France between 1940 and 1942, we are able to understand how much effect the Vichy authorities had on people's opinions, how much influence the Résistance and de Gaulle attained during the first two years of the war, and how the early relative freedom of the people and threat of German occupation changed their perceptions of de Gaulle and the Free French.

Even though most historians have looked at French opinion as a collective whole, their conclusions are nevertheless very useful for understanding opinions in unoccupied France. There have been many attempts to determine the extent of Gaullist support in metropolitan France during the war years. The 'sword and shield theory' which was further developed in Robert Aron's 1954 book 'The Vichy Régime' and supported by the 'pétaino-gaulliste' Colonel Rémy²⁰⁹, was the first theory to come to any conclusion on this matter. This double game theory effectively halved the influence that de Gaulle was supposed to have achieved in France. By these accounts, he could not have succeeded without Pétain. At about the same time, the Gaullist resistancialist myth gathered speed with memoirs from Colonel Passy and Jacques Soustelle adding weight to de Gaulle's contentions in his own memoirs that support for Gaullism was widespread at a very early date and increased towards the end of the war²¹⁰. This theory was reinforced by historians such as Paul-Marie de la Gorce and François Mauriac²¹¹. Historians such as Pierre Laborie and Robert O. Paxton effectively destroyed the theories that Vichy and de Gaulle were very popular during the Second World War²¹². Robert O. Paxton believes that 'the response to Gaullism was even less enthusiastic in 1941 and 1942 than it had been in 1940' because of de Gaulle's exile in London, Anglo-Gaullist exploits in the French Empire, and the British bombing and blockade during this time. Paxton believes that it was only from February 1943 that the French decisively turned against the Vichy régime and began supporting Gaullism in large numbers²¹³. Another recent historian, John F. Sweets, believes that the 'shift in French

²⁰⁹ Robert Aron, *The Vichy Régime, 1940-1944* (London, 1958; trans. Humphrey Hare), Rémy, *Courage and Fear*, and Rémy, *Dix Ans avec de Gaulle*, p.21.

²¹⁰ Passy, *Souvenirs I / II*, Jacques Soustelle, *Envers et Contre Tout* (London, 1950) and Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre I*.

²¹¹ Paul-Marie de la Gorce, *De Gaulle entre Deux Mondes* (1964) and François Mauriac, *De Gaulle* (Paris, 1964) referred to in Crawley, *De Gaulle*, p.491.

²¹² Laborie, *L'Opinion Française* and Paxton, *Vichy France*.

²¹³ Paxton, *Vichy France*, pp.239-241.

public opinion away from Pétain and Vichy to enthusiasm for de Gaulle...was well under way by 1942' and that by November 1942, 'Gaullism had already achieved substantial support in France providing for most of the French an increasingly attractive alternative to the Vichy régime'²¹⁴. To determine if any of these views are accurate and to reach a conclusion, we must conduct an evaluation of the general views of people living in unoccupied France including their opinions on de Gaulle and his movement. Information will be utilised from earlier chapters.

Between 1940 and 1942, the people in unoccupied France experienced so many different emotions that it is almost impossible to offer any generalisations about their views and opinions. The types of emotions that they were experiencing were also very conflicting, resulting in a general sense of indecision and apathy, especially after the defeat of France in June 1940. This was due to a sense of premature French capitulation among some, due to a feeling of blaming oneself or France as a whole for the defeat²¹⁵, and due to the ongoing policy of 'attentisme' which many French people adopted from the outset²¹⁶. It seemed sensible to wait and see, but this became more and more of an issue when Vichy's active collaboration with the Nazis became more obvious and prevalent. This apathy and indecision did not really start to decline until 1941 but it continued to prevail amongst some people at least until the end of the war. It all depended upon whether people were waiting to see what Vichy would do or were waiting to see what the Allies would do to assist in the liberation of France. The former would be perhaps disappointed from the summer of 1941 onwards and the latter may have waited until the Normandy landings before expressing their support for the Allies²¹⁷.

At the same time, the defeat of France led to the proliferation of ideas amongst some French people of the unoccupied zone regarding the regeneration of France. The newspaper 'Le Journal des Débats' expresses the view that 'tous ceux qui disposent de quelque influence sur l'esprit public' need to 'définir les règles de la raison et de la politique qui permettront un renouveau de notre pays'²¹⁸. The need for a new set of moral values was a reaction to the defeat and was a way of blaming the Third Republic for their downfall. What is not clear from the newspapers is whether these 'influential leaders' who were supposed

²¹⁴ Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France*, p.167.

²¹⁵ Article by Lucien Romier in *Le Figaro* (25 September 1940), p.1.

²¹⁶ Beaufre, 1940: *The Fall of France*, p.259.

²¹⁷ The French Résistance newspaper *Les Petites Ailes* (1941) 1e and FO 371 31943 1942 French File Z7673 'Report on French Morale' by War Cabinet Offices (7 October, 1942) complain about the apathetic behaviour of the French in the free zone.

²¹⁸ *Journal des Débats* (7 July 1940), p.1. Another example in *Le Figaro* (4 July 1940), p.1.

to save the country were members of the Vichy régime or part of the Free French Movement. What is almost certain is that their early hopes lay in the policies and actions of the Vichy Government. People in the southern zone were divided amongst themselves over the question of who was responsible for the defeat and by the terms of the Armistice; the majority were however convinced that the Third Republic's decadence led to the catastrophe and that the Armistice had been a wise move by Pétain and his government. The idea of regeneration in 1940 would have to be modified in subsequent years.

Following the defeat in 1940, the effects of the German war machine and the blockade and bombing by the British worsened the morale of the French in the unoccupied zone. It was further exacerbated by the loss or captivity of so many loved ones during and after the conflict. The Germans grabbed all the coal and petrol from the southern French whose industries had to depend on the Germans to survive. An initial unemployment problem in the south grew worse with the arrival of three hundred thousand refugees from the North. The partial British blockade in the Mediterranean was blamed for the sudden shortages of food and resources in the southern zone. The real reasons, the German occupation costs and demands, were something that the French public were ignorant about. When the RAF bombing raids began, people started to believe Vichy and German propaganda that the British were their real enemy. They thought that the British were revenging themselves for France's decision to capitulate. Morale did not really recover until much later in the war when the Allies were closer to victory and the Americans had entered the European conflict. Up until at least November 1942, morale remained very low. According to a report by a Dutch ex-Vice Consul, 'Unoccupied France has become an inert mass. She thinks she has nothing but her security and personal comfort. Collective matters are only of secondary interest. Alcoholism and amorality have become general'²¹⁹.

People in unoccupied France had one great fear – the occupation of their zone. This became an obsession. They wanted at all costs to retain their liberty. This brought them closer to the Vichy Government who seemed to act as a barrier to the Nazis. According to a Foreign Office Intelligence Report, 'the French generally suffer their greatest anxiety from their fear of the unknown or unexpected. Known and experienced horrors are having less emotional effect and are better resisted and supported. This may explain why there is less evidence of anxiety (though much of real suffering) from the occupied zone than

²¹⁹ FO 371 31941 Z5233 'Morale in Unoccupied France' Report by ex-Vice Consul (whose lived in France for twenty-two years).

from the unoccupied zone. It also helps to explain why fear of occupation caused more anxiety than the experience itself²²⁰. In 1940 and 1941, any notion of civil unrest, any change in circumstances which could threaten the 'status quo' of the present unoccupied zone's arrangements was seen as forbidden.

Encouragement of the above was also out of the question. This situation became even more confusing because invariably the French people did not believe in what they saw or heard on their newsreels, newspapers and radio stations. They could not take the German propaganda and even Vichy propaganda seriously and this made them even more confused about what the Allies and de Gaulle's intentions were²²¹.

In an attempt to black out what was going on in the war, the French people in the free zone subconsciously went about their business and became pre-occupied in mundane daily tasks. They found something else to do before thinking about their own future and the future of France. By keeping themselves to themselves, they made it much more difficult for *résistance* movements and collective action groups to bring people together. Opinion was very diverse due to the fact that people had not discussed their views with anyone else and until people felt greatly dissatisfied with the current situation, gossip became their staple diet.

Up until the occupation of the southern zone, the people within it were divided by class and politics. Most people, as mentioned above, had lost all faith in the party political system due to the last Republican regime. As stated in an earlier chapter, the majority of people in southern France believed in a governmental regime headed by a strong leader with strong policies on the regeneration of France. Pétain's popularity persisted, even though there were large contingents of left-wing supporters in the free zone. Politics was a dirty word in France at the time, as was social class. The social classes in unoccupied France were viewed as being divided on one simple but decisive matter: - 'le petit peuple est pour la victoire anglaise, la soi-disant bonne société est en faveur de la collaboration'²²². They were also divided over who should take over France and what sort of régime they should introduce. Lack of common interpretations and general confusion brought great benefits to the Vichy government.

²²⁰ FO 371 28270 Z1931 Intelligence Report No. 26 for French Section Advisory Committee: 'Situation in France' (11/03/41) Point 5. De Gaulle expresses similar views quoted in FO 371 28362 1941 France File Z1835 'Yorkshire Post' interview with de Gaulle (cutting) by former Paris correspondent (07/03/41).

²²¹ FO 371 28362 Z2685 Consul General Parr (Brazzaville) 'Report on General de Larminat's Statement of 18 February and broadcast of 22 February' (10/03/41), pp.3-4.

²²² FO 371 28271 Z2918 'Conditions in France' (09/04/41) Notes from Maître Harpignier, a Belgian lawyer who has got to Portugal from Vichy (via British Embassy, Lisbon).

Public opinion of Vichy was, as would be expected, varied and historians still disagree over the extent of Vichy support and when the support faded²²³. What is almost certain is that for at least the first couple of months after the defeat of France, the creation of Pétain's new Vichy régime was popular and was seen as the saviour of French autonomy and French honour. The semblance of French independence and passive resistance which Vichy provided became the myth of Pétain and the 'État Français'. Pétain also represented the continuation of French national pride and people believed in this self-deception. The main reason for support in unoccupied France was that people believed that Pétain alone had spared them the German occupation and that he had actively encouraged the promotion of national self-glorification during a period of deep national humiliation. The Armistice was viewed as an event that everyone should be grateful for because Pétain had limited the German demands and had saved France from utter submission and even destruction.

There are various examples of the popularity of Pétain in unoccupied France and these examples seem to suggest that Pétain was popular at least up until the total occupation of France. A report by the Dutch ex-Vice Consul suggests that in April 1942, before Laval's return, support for Pétain made up seventy-five per cent of the southern French population²²⁴. The armed forces were bound by their loyalty to a military superior and the officer class shared the same right-wing political convictions that Pétain believed in. Pierre Laborie, the historian, believes that Pétain remained so popular and de Gaulle so unpopular because people in France were little or badly informed²²⁵. The Vichy régime rested on the popularity of Pétain and until Pétain's prestige decreased, his government would be safe and de Gaulle's support in the free zone would be limited.

There were mixed feelings on the subject of Vichy throughout the first two and a half years of occupation. According to Pierre Laborie, the majority of French people remained "attentistes" and therefore the government was not unpopular enough to spur them into action or to revolt against it in any great numbers²²⁶. The government was seen as an essential but temporary institution. They were attentistes out of laziness, out of fear, for solidarity with the résistants, and others became attentistes to wait for the

²²³ Refer to Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France*, and Paxton, *Vichy France*.

²²⁴ FO 371 31941 Z5233 'Morale in Unoccupied France' Report by Dutch ex-Vice Consul (whose lived in France for twenty-two years). Also refer to FO 371 31939 1942 France File No.81 Z2506 and FO 371 28272 Z4320 and Z4763.

²²⁵ Laborie, *L'opinion française*, pp. 224-5.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.268.

opportunity to actively join the Résistance. This attitude was also very unfavourable to the Free French who relied on Vichy's visible decrease in popularity to better their own international and metropolitan standing. The Vichy government was also widely regarded as a right-wing government and this divided the French from the outset. Supporters of Vichy came mainly from the army, the Church, and the countryside. According to a Foreign Office report in 1941, the upper classes were much more likely to support Pétain if not Vichy²²⁷. The régime was popular with people who wanted a 'strong' government, those Catholics who thought the defeat was a punishment for their sins, those who wanted a new start, and the vast minority who wanted to collaborate with the Germans. This left a great proportion of the French population who de Gaulle could attract and bring over to his side.

The point at which Pétain and the Vichy government became unpopular has been a source of contention among historians for the past fifty years²²⁸. There is no one turning point in Vichy history that marks the beginning of their downfall in the eyes of the French public. The first big mistake which Pétain and his government made was the meeting between Hitler and Pétain at Montoire. This proved later on to be a gross error of judgement as collaboration became very unpopular, but at the time, there was a mixed reaction because 'attentisme' was still popular. The Vichy government regained lost ground in December 1940 by forcing the resignation of Pierre Laval who was viewed as less than honourable. His replacement was Admiral Darlan who was a popular choice. By the spring of 1942, Darlan was very unpopular²²⁹ and he was replaced by the equally unpopular Laval who guided the Vichy régime into a slow but steady decline which accelerated after the total occupation of France in 1942. The 'vent mauvais' which engulfed the Vichy régime from the start of Darlan's reign was largely due to the extension of the war in the Balkans and North Africa, the capitulation of Greece, the intensification of Darlan's collaborative initiatives, his famous 'Protocols of Paris' between himself and Germany, the battle between Vichy forces and 'la dissidence gaulliste' in Syria, the entry of Russia into the war, the multiplied constraints of daily life, the

²²⁷ FO 371 28272 Z4763 Mr Neville Butler to Mr. Mack (16/05/41):- 'France Forever Dossier from USA' (Information from France) in report of Mrs. Anne Holloway (16/04/41).

²²⁸ Richard Griffiths, *Marshal Pétain* (London, 1994), pp. 271-291 and Milton Dank, *The French against the French: Collaboration and Resistance* (London, 1974), pp. 61-4 believe that Montoire marked the death knell of the Vichy régime. Lacouture, *De Gaulle: The Rebel*, p.282 states that it was not until 1941 that Vichy became unpopular. Aron, *The Vichy Régime 1940-1944*, pp. 368-9 believes that Vichy became unpopular from the summer of 1942 (the demonstrations marking a turning point). Paxton, *Vichy France*, p.241... expresses the view that the French population did not turn against the Vichy régime until February 1943 (according to French Prefet reports).

²²⁹ FO 371 31939 Z2506 Lord Bessborough to Mr. Mack (24/03/42) 'Views of Pierre Huni on the situation in France'.

increase in rules, restrictions and prices, the ration crisis, the failure of the 'Révolution Nationale', and the increase in résistance and Gaullist activities against Vichy. When Laval took over in April 1942, some thought he was the last chance to save France from German domination and was a more suitable alternative to Jacques Doriot²³⁰. However, his speech of 22 June 1942 left no unanswered questions after he stated that he believed in a German victory. From then on the decline became more rapid compared to before with the re-emergence of General Giraud as a new rival to Pétain, the stronger and more professional de Gaulle movement, the introduction of the STO scheme, and the transportation of Jews to the East, not to mention the loss of more French empirical interests and the deterioration of Vichy's standing in international relations. By the spring of 1941, the popularity of Vichy was waning. Public opinion started increasingly to turn against the Vichy régime but still remained unsure about Pétain.

It was not a natural progression that de Gaulle would automatically gain the support that the Vichy régime had lost. In fact, the Vichy Government lost its support unsequentially. Its decline was not the same in each region of the free zone. This makes it very difficult to know when the régime was losing ground and how much of this support was being transferred over to the Gaullists. In general terms, the unoccupied zone owed more allegiance to Pétain and his régime than the occupied zone. The population in the unoccupied zone was willing to give Pétain, at least, the benefit of the doubt. He had saved them from many restrictions and many hardships. This slightly more relaxed society suffered from censorship but reaped other benefits such as allowing people to say what they think. Of course there were restrictions on this also but people could say what they believed and could create new organisations and even resistance movements without much trouble at first. People felt as if they could support an organisation that did not necessarily have to be pro-Vichy. In this atmosphere, support for Gaullism was relatively able to grow.

In contrast, the sense of indecision and apathy that people in unoccupied France experienced made it very difficult for the Gaullists to gain substantial support. De Gaulle had no known philosophy, political ideals or policies on the renewal of France²³¹. He was a relatively unknown general whom people were naturally suspicious of for these reasons. Of the people who did know him, he was viewed by many as a cold, aloof and selfish man. Vice-Admiral Muselier states that, 'il semblait oublier que nos ennemis

²³⁰ Marie-Thérèse Viaud, 'La Dordogne' in Azéma and Bédarida (eds.) *La Régime des Français*, p.547.

²³¹ FO 371 31939 Z2506 Lord Bessborough to Mr.Mack (24/03/42) 'Views of Pierre Huni, a Swiss businessman, on the situation in France'.

n'étaient pas des Français, il s'obstinait à ne pas comprendre qu'il fallait, avant tout, réconcilier les Français entre eux, et gagner à notre cause les égarées que la défaite avait éloignés du parti l'espoir de la liberté....C'est ainsi que le mouvement des Français combattants, qui prétendait représenter la France, fut dirigé par un apprenti dictateur incompetent, pourvu de pouvoirs plus étendus que ceux des monarques les plus absolutistes²³². With morale low in the free zone and divisions of politics and social class further hampering collective action, early support for de Gaulle remained only on the fringes of society. Idealists were few and far between in the first year of the war and civil unrest, an expected side-effect from de Gaulle's policies, was very unpopular.

According to Anne Laurens, de Gaulle's rivals had no idea what France was going through and they didn't understand the political aspects and implications as de Gaulle did²³³. This point is rather contentious because de Gaulle, when living in France, had only resided in Paris. He had been abroad for long periods of time and his political experience was next to nothing. He had no idea what France was going through after the defeat and was very cautious to venture an opinion on the political arena because of, amongst other reasons, his inexperience in politics and his unfamiliarity with what his fellow Frenchmen would think of him. This made it harder for him to establish a bond between the southern French and himself because it led to a situation which caused a great deal of harm in the free zone. De Gaulle seemed to be disinterested in the people of metropolitan France and only became actively involved in trying to get in contact with them in 1942 and thereafter. De Gaulle had not put forward any plan for developing Gaullism in unoccupied France until 1942 because of his inexperience but also because of logistics. He had, however, been very interested in the French people. This detachment from mainland France soured many possible relationships between Free French and French people in the southern zone.

As mentioned in a previous chapter²³⁴, de Gaulle and the Free French were mainly unpopular and unknown until the Dakar fiasco in September 1940 when they became more unpopular. The effects of Vichy propaganda on letters from unoccupied France were clearly evident after the Dakar incident when one writer stated, 'all the English already regret what they have done to us under the orders of that dirty

²³² Muselier, *De Gaulle contre le Gaullisme*, p.391. Also refer to pp.392-3. De Gaulle's 'egotistical attitude' also referred to in Robert Mengin, *No Laurels for de Gaulle* (London, 1966; trans. Jay Allen), pp.69-128.

²³³ Anne Laurens, *Les Rivaux de Charles de Gaulle: - La bataille de la légitimité en France de 1940 à 1945* (Paris, 1977), p.61.

²³⁴ op. cit., p.26-27.

traitor, de Gaulle'²³⁵. De Gaulle's early colonial gains were supposed to gain his movement a power base, a supplement to his Free French forces and popular support in France, but instead the southern French were angered by the fact that he had stolen parts of the glorious French Empire, an Empire that along with the French Navy was viewed as something to be proud of in a time of misery and despair. This anger and distrust towards de Gaulle did not fade away; his forces' participation in the Syrian conflict further hampered his cause. According to Mr. Pierre Dupuy in September 1941, the southern French 'are ready to approve their compatriots' [Free French] fighting against Germans and Italians but criticise them openly for their initiative in the French Colonies' and they asked why de Gaulle did not actively take part in the fighting himself²³⁶. False claims levelled at de Gaulle included that he was too left-wing, too right-wing, too Royalist, that he was a supporter of European Jewry and that his success would herald an era of religious persecution²³⁷. One popular view was that, 'a Free French leader's name should recall the ancient glory of France'²³⁸ and de Gaulle's name lacked these qualities.

De Gaulle's movement may not have been very popular in 1940 but the people who would later volunteer to join his cause or another *résistance* movement were not all supporters of Vichy and collaboration at that time. A B.E.F. soldier describes one such possible resister: - 'I know that what I saw in her eyes [a French nurse] is the real, undying France, with her courage and culture, her pride and her gaiety, her love for the noble and the beautiful'²³⁹. Hope had not been lost by all French people but these kinds of people were few and far between in unoccupied France. What did seem promising was that most of the people in unoccupied France did not believe in collaboration with the Germans²⁴⁰. They believed in the regeneration of France by their own means. They wanted to rediscover their own national identity by being given the chance to be independent again. They would never have settled for being a satellite of the

²³⁵ FO 371 24314 C11691 Postal Censorship Reports 'Unoccupied France' No.86 (15 November 1940):- 'Letter from La-Chapelle-Pontenevaux'. Other similar examples in letters from Tangier, Vichy and Lyons.

²³⁶ WO 193/182 Directorate of Military Operations 'France under the Vichy Government 26 October 1940 – October 1942':- 'Telegram sent to Mr. Mackenzie (25 September 1941) by Mr. Pierre Dupuy, Canadian Charge d'Affaires at Vichy, on his return to London after his third mission to Vichy'.

²³⁷ The left-wing and Royalist claims quoted in FO 371 28460 1941 France File No.792 Z7920 'Opinion in France of General de Gaulle' (15/09/41) Col. J.W. Carlisle (War Office) to Mr. Mack. The Jewish claim quoted in FO 371 28270 Z1969 'Situation in France' (report prepared by Free French Headquarters) (13/03/41) 'France from 15-28/02/41'. The Religious persecution claim quoted from FO 371 28271 Z3102 BBC European Intelligence Section 'British Broadcasts to France and the conditions there' (11/41) Based on French, British and foreign press and BBC fanmail (11/03/41).

²³⁸ FO 371 31939 Z2506 Lord Bessborough to Mr.Mack (24/03/42) 'Views of Pierre Huni, a Swiss businessman, on the situation in France'.

²³⁹ Daily Mirror (17 July 1940), p.9. 'She is the REAL France!' Account by a B.E.F. soldier.

²⁴⁰ Daily Express (8 August 1941), p.2. 'Vain Little Traitors' by Michael Powers (French Editor escaped to New York).

German Empire. Honour and pride were too important to the French nation for them to give up all hope and become subservient to the Germans permanently.

One of the benefits of the unoccupied zone, compared to the occupied zone, was that people could express themselves quite freely up until 1942 without fear of immediate arrest. In December 1941, Pierre-Henri Teitgen was able to say, 'we wish for an American victory'²⁴¹. Ideology and freedom of thought could develop quickly in the southern zone which greatly increased the possibility of large *résistance* movements gathering together to discuss matters of importance and allowed them to co-ordinate their actions freely. It also meant that public opinion reports from the unoccupied zone were perhaps more accurate due to this 'relative' freedom of speech.

When the Americans and, to a lesser extent, the Russians entered the war, this gave the French people something to hope for. As mentioned in an earlier chapter²⁴², they now felt as if the British might win and that it was probably more advantageous to support the Allies. The French had a very high opinion of the Americans and for once it looked doubtful whether the Axis powers would succeed at all. Furthermore, by the start of 1942, the French people had to admit that the British had been successful in thwarting the German offensive against them, despite everything. The success of Operation Torch and the Russians' brave defence at Stalingrad led to many people re-assessing where they stood and determining what they now stood for. The turn in the fortunes of war shifted popular opinion from Vichy to the Allies.

As the French *Résistance* grew and became more of a collective entity, there were various shifts of opinion in southern France. As mentioned in the above chapter, their active support was unsubstantial but the passive support that they obtained increased from the summer of 1941 onwards when *résistance* activities became more prevalent. Their acts of heroism, their resolute determination and their self-promoting propaganda popularised their cause somewhat. As their links and communication increased with the Free French movement, so de Gaulle could enjoy some of their popularity²⁴³. His name was now synonymous with the French *Résistance* and through his own propaganda, through his agents and through his colonial gains, he was able to yield power over them and become the nominal 'head' of the *Résistance*. His new status empowered him with the conviction that he would now take over from Pétain when

²⁴¹ Pierre-Henri Teitgen quoted in G. Bouladou, 'Contribution à l'étude de l'histoire de la *Résistance* dans le département de l'Herault' (unpub. thèse 3e cycle, Montpellier, 1965), p.95 quoted in Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France*, p.45.

²⁴² op. cit., p. 53.

²⁴³ op. cit., p.65-66.

liberation beckoned. His confidence grew as did his support; the Résistance became more popular in the free zone towards the end of 1942 when young men left the towns and villages to escape Laval's S.T.O. scheme and join the 'Maquis' groups that were amassing in the hills and countryside. People were now more likely to be related to or friends with a resister.

Increasingly, the people lost faith in Vichy in favour of the Résistance, including de Gaulle and the Free French. Many people were impressed with his new power base on French soil which bolstered his claim to legitimacy at Brazzaville in 1940. Politics was not popular between 1940 and 1942 and by revealing his political manifesto too early, de Gaulle would have threatened his chances of gaining support from a lot of factions and social classes in France. When de Gaulle introduced his political manifesto to the French people in July 1942, he was successful in gaining support because he had tried to please everyone. He was a synthesiser of ideas²⁴⁴.

Some people viewed de Gaulle as being unique in the sense that his Free French cause was out of the ordinary. It was the earliest known form of résistance and its military objectives had been clearly set out from day one. Free French propaganda emphasised this. De Gaulle also came to be perceived as more independent than was at first thought. His blatant public disagreements with his Allies led people to respect him for his uncompromising determination to liberate France and replace Vichy with a solely French administration. However, his connections with the British were so strong that as their support grew, so did his. He benefited from the turn in fortunes of the war because it looked as though he would be on the winning side. Part of the appeal of Gaullism was the double game myth which increased de Gaulle's popularity. One person wrote 'Pétain, Weygand and de Gaulle are the hope of the future'²⁴⁵. Even though this was the case, by September 1942 the double game theory was becoming unrealistic and people began to judge and support de Gaulle on his own merits. It is also evident that the Free French found it easier to gather support and co-ordinate activities in unoccupied France than in the occupied zone and this may have been due to the freer self-expression and freedom of movement in the southern zone. Henri Michel states that 'la France Libre...représentait l'opinion publique française en miniature'²⁴⁶. De Gaulle's new status as

²⁴⁴ Charles G. Cogan, *Charles de Gaulle: A Brief Biography with Documents* (Boston and New York, 1996), pp.100-101.

²⁴⁵ FO 371 28270 Z2672 'Situation in France' British Library of Information (New York) to American Department. Conversation with a young soldier, demobilised from Bordeaux and recently arrived in the U.S. (11 March, 1941). Also refer to [FO 371 28272 Z4654](#), [Z4763](#) and [Z5251](#), and [FO 371 28268 Z714](#).

²⁴⁶ Henri Michel, *La Guerre de l'Ombre: la Résistance en Europe* (Paris, 1970), p.325.

'head' of the Résistance and leader of 'la France Combattante' gave his movement an effective new image which appealed to the French public. He had come a long way since the dark days of the defeat and Mers-el-Kébir tragedy.

Public opinion began to identify nationalism with de Gaulle and the Free French. Although people in southern France did not really know who de Gaulle was, they knew that he was a nationalist: - he believed in France's future and wanted them to believe in it too. His uncompromising determination to liberate the French from German occupation and restore France to its former greatness was admired by the French people.

There are various opinions, as detailed at the beginning of this chapter, on the extent of Gaullist support in unoccupied France. Even though there were less restrictions in the free zone, the people were also very pro-Pétain and therefore were not as sympathetic to de Gaulle's cause as occupied people were. The constant fears of occupation and obtrusive daily pre-occupations made them unsupportive of de Gaulle's cause. It was only when America entered the war and the Allies looked like victors, when Vichy collaboration and Pétain's ineffectiveness became more blatant, and when de Gaulle's movement and Free French agents became more evident on the mainland that the southern French population began to support de Gaulle and the Free French. There have been various estimates of how many people supported de Gaulle in the free zone, from seven per cent in 1942 to sixty-five per cent in 1941²⁴⁷. These figures and other primary sources have to be taken lightly due to the fact that there are different definitions of Gaullism; some sources claim that a Gaullist is someone who is simply anti-German²⁴⁸. However, of the sources who describe Gaullists as supporters of de Gaulle and the Free French, their evidence seems to suggest that from 1942, public opinion's support for de Gaulle became 'popular', especially after the renaming of the movement to 'la France Combattante', the brave defence by Free French forces at Bir-Hakeim and Laval's

²⁴⁷ Refer to FO 371 31941 Z5233 'Morale in Unoccupied France' Report by Dutch ex-Vice Consul states that fifteen per cent are Gaullist, FO 371 28272 Z5024 Mr. Lloyd (Colonial Office) to Mr. Mack (12/06/41) 'Conditions in France: Recorded by M. Antier' states that eighty-five per cent of occupied France and sixty-five per cent of unoccupied France are pro-de Gaulle. Manchester Guardian (Manchester, 19 September 1942), p.6 M. Vallin, a 'pro-Fascist', states, 'Ninety per cent of the French are in favour of de Gaulle'. FO 371 31942 1942 France File No.81 Z6266 Report by M. de Schrijver, Belgian Minister for Economic Affairs who escaped from France (31 July 1942) 'Conditions in the unoccupied zone' states that support in unoccupied France for Gaullism is no more than seven to eight per cent.

²⁴⁸ FO 371 32027 Z7080 Lord Cranborne to Mr. Eden (11/09/42) 'General de Gaulle' Views of Frenchman Comert. Refer to Thomas, Britain and Vichy, pp.135-136.

blunder in his speech on the radio in July 1942²⁴⁹. This does not agree with the views of John F. Sweets and Robert O. Paxton, nor the Gaullist resistancialists. This popular support still remained passive and was not unconditional; there would still be many hurdles to cross before de Gaulle triumphantly entered Paris in the summer of 1944. Before 1942, de Gaulle was unpopular because he did not seem to take metropolitan France seriously, yet southern French people began to support him. In late 1940, de Gaulle was 'a known and popular figure' but by 1942, he had become 'a potential leader'²⁵⁰.

²⁴⁹ Refer to FO 371 31942 Z6129 'Notes by W. Strang' (31 August 1942) and PREM 3/120/6:- P.M.42/184 Memorandum to P.M. by Anthony Eden (22/09/42):- Point 16. Some Vichy sources also state his popularity:- Remarques sur les manifestations du 14 Juillet 1942, direction des Menées antinationales, V,AN,F7/14987 and le préfet régional de Marseilles stated in AD Bouches-du-Rhône, rapport no.188, 22 Juillet 1942 and in AN/AJ 41/25. All quoted in Cremieux-Brilhac, La France Libre, pp.223-224.

²⁵⁰ First quote from FO 371 28268 Z115 Letter from Sir Samuel Hoare (Madrid, 01/01/41). Views of a group of wounded British officers. Second quote from FO 371 31943 Z6816 From British Representative to Fighting French National Committee to Foreign Office (Mr. Rooker) (01/09/42)- Views of Mr. Felix Gouin (he voted against Pétain on 10 July 1940).

Conclusion

The Soul of France:- 'To Charles de Gaulle'

France the France we loved finds its expression in his name

The France that grieves to see her children branded with the shame

Of mute subjection, crushed into the ashes of defeat

In this man we see the France that Hitler could not beat

France has been betrayed by France; but there will surely be

A day of wrath and of revenge for this foul treachery

And though o'er her unhappy land the bitter years may roll

France will wake to rediscover her own immortal soul

By Patience Strong (17 July 1940)²⁵¹.

This poem, written two weeks after the Mers-el-Kébir incident, provides an inaccurate view of what French people were feeling. It is a poem set in the future. It could easily have been used in the post-war years to reinforce the myth of Gaullist resistancialism. In 1940, the reality was very different. People in unoccupied France at the time were unaware of de Gaulle's new movement except for the information they had received about the Mers-el-Kébir incident and about his speeches. To determine whether the Mers-el-Kébir incident was as significant in 1942 as it was in 1940, this final chapter will compare the reasons for Charles de Gaulle's popularity and unpopularity and rate them against the effect of the Mers-el-Kébir incident as well as determining whether the extent of his support was beyond his control or due to his own actions.

Shortly after the defeat, de Gaulle travelled to London to set up a new movement to carry on the conflict in exile. His 'appel' of 18 June 1940 and subsequent speeches were very insignificant at the time. Hardly anyone listened to them and hardly anyone knew who de Gaulle was. These speeches would only

²⁵¹ Patience Strong quoted in Daily Mirror (17 July 1940), p.5.

become significant towards the end of the war when de Gaulle was hailed as the first resister of France. Some newspapers wrote extracts of the speeches in their columns but most ignored them. It was only when the Pétain Government denounced his cause in the daily French newspapers that people in the unoccupied zone began to take notice of him. He was branded by the government as a lackey of the British.

The Mers-el-Kébir incident was very significant at the time and is still significant to this day²⁵². People in southern France were not yet accustomed to Vichy propaganda and still believed a lot of what they read in the papers. As mentioned in the Mers-el-Kébir chapter, they became very anti-British and they associated de Gaulle with the British. The Free French Movement became unpopular because people started to believe that de Gaulle had advised the British on the action or had known about the 'planned' attack and had not forewarned the French Navy. It was overall a very depressing moment in de Gaulle's career. He felt like leaving England for Canada and giving up on the idea of the Free French movement. For many Frenchmen in the unoccupied zone, this was the first time that they had heard about de Gaulle. The first impressions of him that they gathered from news reports were not very positive, especially when his eighth of July speech condoned the British action at Oran. His movement would be tarred with the same brush for the next few years. The real significance of the Mers-el-Kébir incident was that it was the first time that the French public were 'formally introduced' to de Gaulle and what they heard, they did not like.

The significance of the incident did not die away. The Vichy Government made sure that it was remembered every year on its anniversary and the same feelings about de Gaulle that the French public had experienced in July 1940 were felt again during various other incidents over the next two years. The only difference was that de Gaulle had played a part in these incidents and had not just been an onlooker as he was in July 1940. The Dakar fiasco of September 1940, the Syrian conflict in the summer of 1941, the various African colonial exploits and the invasion of St. Pierre-et-Miquelon were regarded as criminal acts by many French people. The people who believed in de Gaulle's cause and in an Allied victory were very positive about de Gaulle's actions abroad, but the influence of Mers-el-Kébir and Vichy propaganda had stuck and most people viewed these incidents as attempts by the British, with Gaullist assistance, to take over the French Empire. What made it worse was that de Gaulle and his movement were actively involved

²⁵² Reference to an incident in November 1999 when Winston Churchill's statue in Paris was vandalised with the words 'L'assassin de Mers-el-Kébir' daubed in blood-red paint across Churchill's face. Article '1,300 dead, their fleet blown to bits...is this why the French still mistrust us?' by Alistair Home in *Daily Mail* (London, 27 November 1999), pp.44-45.

in all of these incidents. The only difference between Dakar and Mers-el-Kébir was that de Gaulle's so-called treachery was half-expected when the Dakar fiasco occurred, whereas the Mers-el-Kébir incident had set the precedent.

On the other hand, the conflict in Syria was slightly more influential because it greatly affected the people in the free zone. Some people who believed in the double game between Pétain and de Gaulle had to re-evaluate the situation. Some people hailed de Gaulle's victory as a triumph for French freedom and the first step towards liberation. Others became aware of the levels that Vichy would stoop to collaborate with the Germans and became very unhappy with the present government. Many people agreed with the Vichy propagandists' line that de Gaulle was a traitor for fighting against and killing other Frenchmen, and for handing the Syrian territories over to the British. The greatest effect that Syria had on the people was to split them up. It probably did de Gaulle a favour in the long run by dispelling any notion of collaboration between Vichy and himself but it also drew clearly defined lines between factions and groups which became irreconcilable. The people came to distrust Admiral Darlan and Pierre Laval but also distrusted de Gaulle.

Other actions and policies that de Gaulle undertook himself were not very significant to the southern French population. People seemed only to venture an opinion on matters which affected the French nation as a whole such as losing parts of the Empire to a renegade general. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that de Gaulle's speeches on the radio were not seen as very important by many people; only Résistance fighters took any real notice of them. The southern French definitely preferred to listen to the BBC for their news but many only listened to the French news and switched off before the Free French bulletin began. Many people did not take him seriously at first; the significance of his speeches, including his 'Appel', would not become apparent until the summer of 1942 when he first professed his new political manifesto. From then on, the Free French and Résistance propaganda played on the fact that de Gaulle had carried on the conflict at a time when Pétain and his government gave up. This only became significant from the summer of 1942 onwards when more people were willing to listen to them with an open mind and became more and more important as D-Day approached in 1944.

The people seemed disinterested in Free French internal affairs. De Gaulle's setting up of the Free French National Committee was widely ignored as were his subordinates in London. Most people in France

did not know who the members of the Free French were; this was partly due to the fact that de Gaulle had overshadowed all his comrades but also due to the people's general disinterest in them. Any plans that Free French ministers had for the future were seen as too hypothetical to take seriously. They were nonentities who meant nothing to the people in the free zone. One significant factor which emerged from Free French internal politics was that some people believed that some higher-ranking Free French officials such as Colonel Passy were members of the Cagoule, an extreme right-wing organisation, and this coloured their view of de Gaulle and his movement. Another factor was that due to the fact that they were unknowns, the people in the free zone could not trust people they did not know and therefore were suspicious of the Free French recruits. This is one reason why Pétain was so popular; they trusted him because they had heard of him before. The Free French Movement also found that their *résistance* activities in unoccupied France did not amount to much and they were very insignificant in changing people's perceptions of their movement. People were either unaware of what actions they were taking or were disinterested in them, and there were not many people willing to work with them.

There was only a small minority of people in the free zone who would participate in *résistance* activities. This was a problem for all the *résistance* movements. Their significance in Vichy France was negligible until 1942. They had few recruits, few resources and organisational deficiencies. They remained small out of choice or because they could not either find new recruits or risk venturing out to find recruits. They remained independent organisations with their own leaders, their own methods and their own ambitions. The Vichy Government was not worried by them; only from 1942 did they use force to try and quash *résistance* activities. The French *Résistance* only became a significant and positive factor for Gaullist support in unoccupied France towards the end of 1942. Groups had amalgamated and there were now larger organisations with more money and resources. These organisations joined up with the Free French and came to be collectively known, with occupied *résistance* movements, as the French *Résistance*. It was only when the *Résistance* grouped together that they were listened to and were respected by more people. They aided de Gaulle by supporting his movement and by agreeing that he was the head of the *Résistance*. Their support was invaluable to de Gaulle; this was especially true of the Communist *Résistance* who brought many left-wing supporters over to de Gaulle's side mostly through their propaganda. From October 1942 onwards, the *Résistance* movements were recognised as a force to be reckoned with, as were the Free

French Résistance. De Gaulle would benefit more from their support in 1943 and 1944 than he had done during the first two years of the war. The Résistance remained on the fringes of society till then.

A very influential factor from day one was the fortunes of war and the actions of the Allies. External events had an enormous impact on de Gaulle's popularity in France. The British made it very difficult for de Gaulle from the very start with their no-nonsense attitude. The British were linked synonymously with de Gaulle in 1940 and 1941 and when they did something which caused anxiety or anger in France, it affected de Gaulle's support. Some people supported de Gaulle because he had powerful allies and because the British were admired for holding out on their own against the Nazi oppressors; others branded him a traitor for working with the British who had 'deserted' the French at Dunkirk and for working with them against the 'legitimate' French state. When the Russians joined the British to fight against the Nazis, the only significant aspect of this decision for the Free French was the French Communist Party's official support for de Gaulle and Britain. Though this increased support for de Gaulle, the Russians' declaration of war on Germany did not change much for the Free French movement. A factor which was especially important was the American decision to enter the war on the Allies' side in December 1941 and the subsequent upturn in the fortunes of the Allies in the conflict. De Gaulle was now more widely respected because he was allied to the United States, Russia and Britain. The upturn in the fortunes of war for the Allies from 1942 was seen as yet another significant event. De Gaulle's cause gained more recognition when he was viewed as being on the winning side. These momentous events also put paid to the Vichy illusion of independence; they had used their friendship with the United States as proof of their independence of action. It also led to the decline in support for the Vichy Government who had been abandoned by the Americans and by 1942 were viewed as being on the Axis side, on the loser's side.

Another influential factor was the Vichy collaboration and propaganda tactics which greatly influenced support for de Gaulle. At first, support was widespread for the Vichy Government, especially for Marshal Pétain. This effectively excluded de Gaulle from the affections of the people in the unoccupied zone. When Vichy entered into a period of collaboration with Germany, most people thought that this would lead to an honourable peace for France. It was only as time went by that the more collaborative the Vichy régime became, the less support they maintained in southern France. The Free French could only be a legitimate movement because Vichy was immoral; as Vichy became more collaborationist, the Free French became

more legitimate²⁵³. This was of great benefit to de Gaulle who became more and more popular as Vichy dug its own grave and people searched for an alternative to them. Vichy propaganda was very influential throughout this period. At first, their propaganda in speeches on the radio, on newsreels and in newspapers was effective because people were unaware that it was being used. Vichy felt threatened by de Gaulle and therefore targeted him in their propaganda. The insults and degradations that Vichy dished out to de Gaulle were not forgotten by the French people; many came to agree with Vichy. However, Vichy propaganda worked in de Gaulle's favour by 1942. As Vichy became more unpopular due to its collaborationist policies, it also lost much of its credibility and its propaganda was read or watched with much scepticism. People came to believe that what the Vichy government said was untrue; de Gaulle's movement benefited enormously from this conclusion. By 1942, the only Vichy stumbling block between de Gaulle and the French people was Pétain, who was still regarded as the nation's leader. Through their policies, Vichy would set themselves a course for self-destruction. They would also unwittingly turn a successful anti-de Gaulle propaganda campaign into an equally successful pro-de Gaulle promotion scheme. They would make it easier and easier for de Gaulle to overtake them in the popularity stakes.

To conclude, the most significant factors determining the support for Gaullism in unoccupied France were the Vichy collaboration and propaganda, and external events such as the actions of the British and the fortunes of war. The reason that these are more significant than the Mers-el-Kébir incident is because the latter incident's significance is bound up with them. Vichy propaganda bent the truth to make the southern French believe that de Gaulle had been involved in the Mers-el-Kébir 'tragedy' and they made sure that the people were constantly reminded of it. They used the incident for their own ends and they were very effective. Furthermore, Mers-el-Kébir was an external event and it was perhaps due to the actions of the British that de Gaulle was placed in an impossible situation in which he had to take one side or the other. These two factors featured prominently in the effects of the incident but they were not the only reasons for the mainly negative effect that the incident had on de Gaulle and the Free French. People did not need Vichy propaganda to suspect that de Gaulle had a part to play in the incident; nor did they suspect him on the sole basis of the British being the main instigators. De Gaulle was unknown and so was his movement. People are naturally suspicious of strangers.

²⁵³ Views of René Cassin quoted in Maguire, *Anglo-American Policy towards the Free French*, pp.4-5.

What was significant about Mers-el-Kébir was that it set a precedent. It was the first event used by the Vichy propagandists to colour French people's opinions of de Gaulle after his June 1940 speeches. It was the first external event to influence the Free French movement. It was the first significant event to affect support for de Gaulle in unoccupied France; it brought him his first real recognition but is also helped to shape French public opinion's views of him. Between 1940 and 1942, it was more significant than the views of the early *résistance*, the organisation and internal politics of the Free French movement and the speeches of de Gaulle. The Mers-el-Kébir incident, similar to the Dakar and Syrian campaigns, was less significant than the external fortunes of war and the Vichy propaganda because both these latter factors feature most prominently in the former incidents and campaigns.

The Mers-el-Kébir incident, the Vichy collaboration and propaganda and the fortunes of war were all matters beyond de Gaulle's control. He was only able to respond to what had happened; for the most part, his own actions were much less significant than other actions and events which were out of his hands. The Mers-el-Kébir 'tragedy' mainly effected de Gaulle's support in a negative way. Vichy collaboration and propaganda and the fortunes of war were negative factors at first but by 1942, they started to work against Vichy and for the Free French. It was only after November 1942 that de Gaulle's own actions became more significant to the French people. These actions were judged by the French on their own merits and not through unreliable Vichy propaganda sources.

This conclusion is not a reaction against de Gaulliana²⁵⁴. From the evidence gathered, it falls broadly into line with the views of Adrienne Hytier and Dorothy S. White and shares some similarities with Robert Mengin, though my conclusion only concerns the first two years of the war²⁵⁵. My views become similar to de Gaulle's own views after November 1942.

As stated in the last chapter, de Gaulle became popular from the summer of 1942 onwards. This support was partly gained by de Gaulle's own actions, by the Free French Movement and by his association with the *Résistance*. However, without Vichy's rejection of de Gaulle and its collaboration with Nazi Germany, Gaullism would not have become the phenomenon that it eventually came to be. De Gaulle would not have come to the attention of the French people without Vichy propaganda. His wartime career would also have

²⁵⁴ *op. cit.*, p.5.

²⁵⁵ Hytier, *Two Years of French Foreign Policy*, pp.82-87, White, *Seeds of Discord*, p.99, and Mengin, *No Laurels for de Gaulle*, p.342.

been very different due to the fact that his main enemy, the Vichy régime, would not have existed. Vichy became an added 'raison d'être' to the Gaullist Movement. Without British support, resources and propaganda, without the Americans' entry into the conflict, and without the Allied victories during the war, de Gaulle would have struggled to make an impact. He owed much of his success and failure in gaining support by 1942 to the Vichy régime and the Allies. There was not one single event which determined de Gaulle's popularity and unpopularity in Vichy France but a succession of internal and external events which became more favourable to him as time went by.

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